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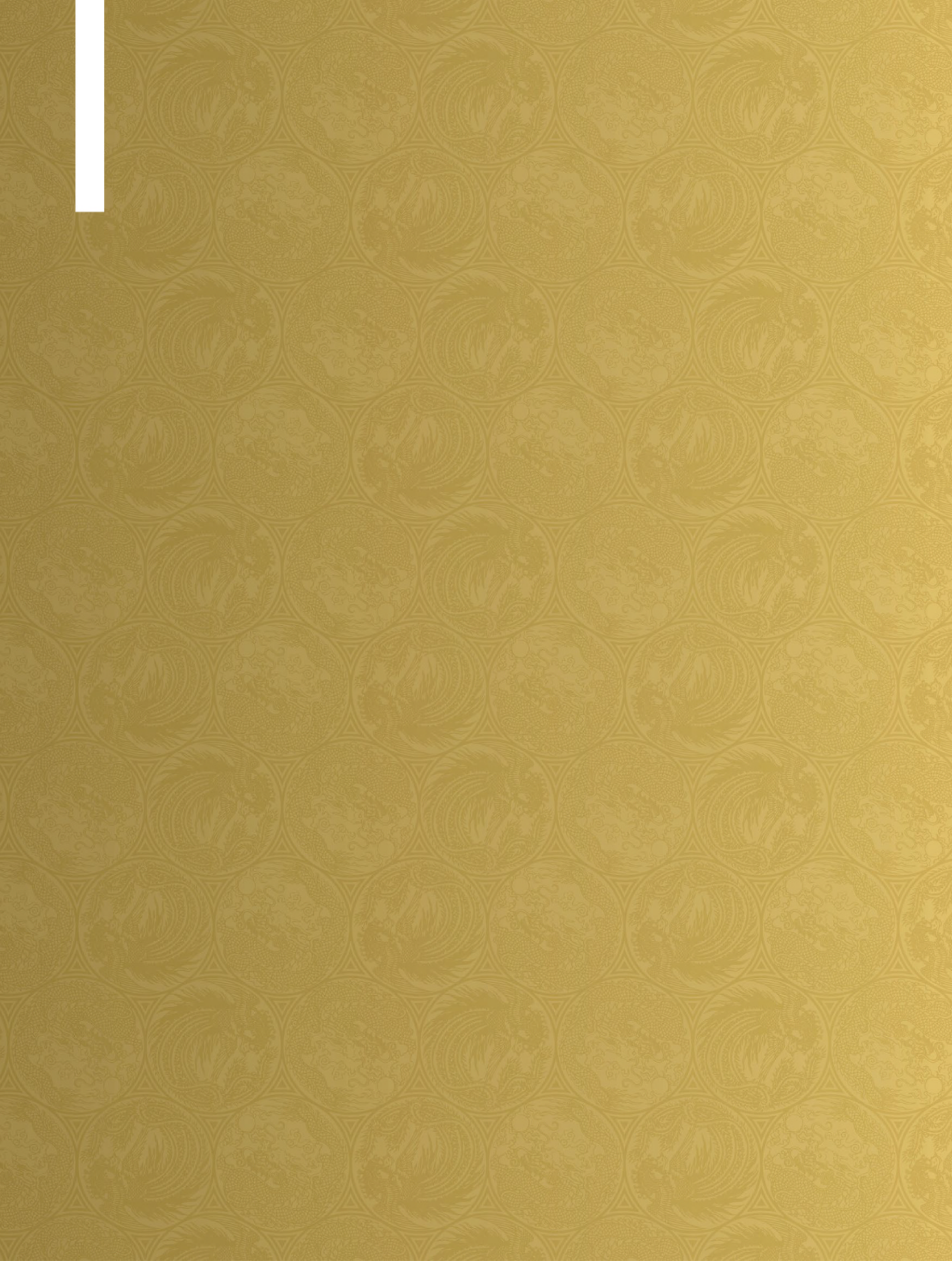
**WORLD  
EXCLUSIVE**  
TWO DECADES  
LATER, CAN  
YU SUZUKI'S  
EPIC FINALLY  
DELIVER ON  
ITS PROMISE?

## SHENMUE III

**#330**

APRIL 2019







# They said it couldn't be done, but you went out and did it

We're often struck by the contradiction innate to videogames, an endlessly forward-thinking medium that forever has an eye on its past. But this month takes that concept to extremes. That's not to say there is nothing in this issue that reflects the here and now: indeed, halfway through production of this issue we had to scramble to make room for the surprise arrival of the wonderful *Apex Legends*. Elsewhere we speak to Google's DeepMind about how it's built an AI capable of beating pro *StarCraft II* players, which has tantalising – and arguably terrifying – implications for the future of interactive entertainment.

Yet two of our biggest stories this issue began more than two decades ago. In *Grain Of Truth* we catch up with Sam Barlow, whose breakout hit, 2015's *Her Story*, wove a fascinating murder mystery using live-action interview footage. It did not occur to him at the time that he was reviving FMV, the much-touted 1990s genre that gave us, well, a load of unintentional laughs at *Night Trap* and very little else. But the way we think of, and consume, story in 2019 has changed greatly since, and it's high time games caught up. In his new game, *Telling Lies*, Barlow is ramping up the production values, with big-name talent on hand as he sets about turning FMV's quiet revival into a noisy revolution.

Then there is *Shenmue*. It killed the Dreamcast and forced Sega out of the hardware business, but the passionate fans of Yu Suzuki's series never gave up on the series or its creator. The 'Save *Shenmue*' campaign was a frequent sight in **Edge's** inbox until their seemingly impossible dream came true when *Shenmue III* was finally announced at E3 2015. Given Suzuki's famous ambivalence to the concept of deadlines, we still weren't sure we quite believed it. But *Shenmue III* is very much real, and it's almost here. This month we find out how Ryo Hazuki is finally to continue his quest to avenge the death of his father – and a legion of fans will end their agonising, near 20-year wait for closure. Our story begins on p58.



Exclusive subscriber edition





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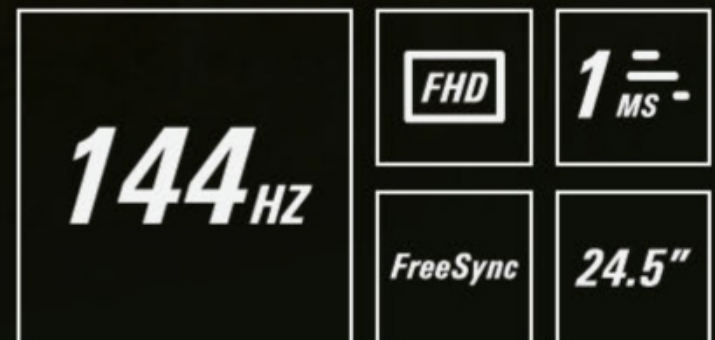




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# League of its own

How DeepMind made an **AI capable of beating StarCraft II pros** – and what it could mean for the real world

**F**irst *StarCraft II*, then the world. Such is the trajectory of neural network AlphaStar. Trained in 18 months by a team at Google's artificial intelligence company DeepMind, it's designed to play Blizzard's realtime strategy game at a competitive level. In a test match at the tail end of last year, DeepMind pitted AlphaStar against top-ranking professional *StarCraft II* players – and humans – Dario "TLO" Wunsch and Grzegorz "MaNa" Komincz. "I was just hoping to see the agent play like it knows how to play," lead researcher **Oriol Vinyals** says. "I didn't want it to break, of course, and I hoped to see a reasonably long game, hopefully balanced in terms of not being too one-sided – for the human." AlphaStar trounced both players 5-0.

As ever, though, this is not just about making an AI good at a computer game for the sake of it. Videogames have long proved excellent virtual testing grounds for AI research, their systems capable of simulating and facilitating various aspects of human intelligence: *Atari*, *Quake III*, *Super Mario* and *Dota 2* have all played their part in helping develop more sophisticated AI. But with its layers of tactical complexity, an AI victory over a human player in *StarCraft II* – even using heavily compromised versions of the game – has emerged as a "grand challenge" among the AI research community, something entirely out of reach. Until AlphaStar, that is.

"We wanted to select a game which was canonical, and challenging," fellow lead researcher **David Silver** says. "*StarCraft* has been widely used across academia for over ten years now, so for



**David Silver (top) and Oriol Vinyals, lead researchers on DeepMind's AlphaStar**



us it was a really natural choice. It's one of the most successful PC games of all time, and it tests and stretches humans in all kinds of dimensions." As the more recent version of the game, *StarCraft II* was the logical next step. But the sequel wasn't available as a benchmark at the time, and so it would be necessary to work more closely with Blizzard to set it up as a testbed for AI algorithms to work with. "The first and most obvious change that we had to work with Blizzard on is that the game runs on Windows and Mac, and most research environments use Linux," Vinyals says.

They decided to run multiple types of machine learning to program AlphaStar's deep neural network, and that meant using Linux. "For us, it was actually not so difficult," Vinyals says, "but for Blizzard who had not released the game for Linux, that was a big first step." It was important to DeepMind that AlphaStar would play the full, unsimplified version of *StarCraft II*. And so it became necessary to work with Blizzard to release an open-source set of tools – PsySC2, which includes the largest number of anonymised game replays ever released – among the research community for it to begin working out how to approach the multiple problems *StarCraft II* poses to players. These include an algorithm having to calculate strategy in constant realtime instead of by turns, "imperfect information" unlike in Go or chess where a player has to actively seek out hidden

and crucial information, and long-term planning in terms of 'macro' plays involving economy and big-picture management as well as 'micro' management of individual units.

**Naturally, Blizzard was** not exactly keen to open-source *StarCraft II* itself – that would be asking for trouble. But the dev didn't need to. "They just released a binary, which is much like the binary release for Windows or Macintosh," Vinyals explains. "It connects with these tools that we co-developed

with them for enthusiasts and researchers to develop agents. The only thing they had to be careful about was to make sure that their game remained safe for players to use." But the possibility of better in-game AI opponents for future games was undoubtedly tempting for Blizzard. "At the moment, human-versus-

human is the only really satisfying mode to play in a lot of these RTS games," Silver says. "And I think Blizzard is very interested in the future possibility of what could be done with AI, not just to build in opponents to have other capabilities such as automated testing, or being able to play with an AI on your side in 2v2 or have it issue commands on your behalf."

With everything in place and everyone on board, training AlphaStar began in earnest, with that blend of imitation and reinforcement learning. For the imitation learning part, Vinyals recalls, they had each agent process about

**"At the moment, human-versus-human is the only really satisfying mode to play in a lot of RTS games"**

A man is shown in profile, focused on playing a game on a computer. He is wearing a large, black and red gaming headset. The room is dimly lit with a strong blue and purple ambient light. A bright light source, possibly a window or a stage light, creates a lens flare effect in the background. The man's right hand is on a mouse, and his left hand is on the keyboard. The monitor displays a game interface with various icons and a map. The overall atmosphere is one of intense concentration and immersion.

For DeepMind, it's exciting to see pro players developing strategies to counter AI and vice versa – and watching the meta cycle build up



## ROBO COPS

Watching footage of an AI dispatching its enemies with cunning and efficiency is as fascinating as it is uncomfortable: we can't help but think of the potential military applications, for instance, of a program specifically designed to outwit unpredictable human behaviour. "Each time a tool like this comes along, it provides a lot of potential for how it may be used, and of course we should be very cognisant of the fact that tools can be used for means other than the ones we created them for," Silver says. "At DeepMind, we're trying to build these AI tools in a way which can allow for a lot of progress to happen. But we also take very seriously the role that we have in that in making sure that happens in a safe and ethical manner." The company has a dedicated unit called DeepMind Ethics & Society, which aims to help technologists put ethics into practices and engage with expert fellows to anticipate and positively direct the potential societal impact of the algorithms it's making.

100,000 games of *StarCraft II*, "much like a human might go and watch on YouTube or Twitch, learning how you play the game even before you start playing it. The first step is to get an agent to understand where people click, what people do, after seeing situations that humans have been put in before." But the second, reinforcement learning-based part would be just as crucial. "Even 100,000 games is not enough to really learn the full details of all the different possible macro- and micro-strategies," Silver says. "We wanted the agent to be able to learn essentially by playing against different versions of itself, and go beyond what we see in the human data." To facilitate this, DeepMind developed the AlphaStar League algorithm, a kind of virtual tournament which has different versions of the agent play against old and new versions of themselves to become stronger. "At the same time, we're also branching new versions of those agents and adding them into the league to increase the diversity," Silver continues, "And this is done by making sure that different agents are playing against different opponents within the league, or that they may adapt incentives to build particular unit types, for example."

Although the League took considerable time and effort to develop, Vinyals believes that it – and its combination with the foundation of imitation learning – was key to how quickly AlphaStar managed to become capable of outfoxing some of the world's best *StarCraft II* pros (indeed, according to a 2017 Wired article, one of DeepMind's advisors predicted it would be five years before a bot beat a human at *StarCraft*). "Things were starting to happen a year ago, and then six months ago we started scaling up the process, and also developing new things in the algorithms that are too detailed to describe, but we are preparing a publication to do so," he says. "It was just an extra week of training from a TLO-beating agent to a [superior] MaNa-beating agent, so the speed of progress

"AI discovers new strategies that people didn't know about, new ways to think about the game"

has definitely picked up in the last couple of months – but many of these ingredients started development quite a while ago."

Not that it was all smooth sailing; where AI goes, quirks often follow. AlphaStar's main vice for quite some time was 'worker rushing', an elementary strategy which involves a player taking all of their mining units and catching an opponent off-guard by throwing them at their base. It's fairly basic to defend against it, and it leaves the initiator highly vulnerable. "What was interesting was that, because we were originally learning by playing not against ourselves but different versions of the agent against themselves, it becomes hard to escape from these traps," Silver says. "They're kind of local basins of attraction you need to learn something much, much more

sophisticated to get out of. We were very happy when we first saw our first units that were not just worker rushing." For Vinyals, one of the most satisfying moments of AlphaStar's creation came during a visit from TLO, as they described how the agents would counter strategies and develop a meta. "So

you would get like, oh my god, invisible units are great – but then agents would discover the cannons that would detect invisible units, and later that they can use observers which are mobile, and so on. I described this to TLO, and he said that was actually how humans went through phases. It was great to hear that what we saw was not that dissimilar to the discovery phase of the game a few years ago, and was revealed by research."

That feeling was nothing, however, to seeing AlphaStar take on a human and win, the team standing in a small room separate from the human player to watch. "We couldn't see the agent's perspective because technically Blizzard hasn't done the observer bit," Vinyals says, "so we saw exactly what TLO or MaNa were seeing on their screen. You have to estimate whether it's looking good or not, but I understand the game enough, and I thought, 'Oh, this is looking really good.' And then the player says 'GG' and quits.

That was almost unbelievable, a whole test of the whole approach: first working with Blizzard, then open-sourcing in a field where others can participate in the process, and then really focusing on this approach of imitation learning first and then the AlphaStar League second. Even winning a single game for me would have been a great victory."

**This emotional moment** for the DeepMind team was also a significant achievement in a much larger sense. "I really felt the momentousness of this from a historic perspective," Silver says. "In the history of AI, there's been a number of key moments where you look at challenge domains people select for artificial intelligence – like chess, when Deep Blue beat Garry Kasparov, or Go, when AlphaGo beat Lee Sedol. There are these moments where a domain kind of transitions from being 'impossible' to 'done', and it's a real privilege to be there at the moment where the transition occurs."

Now, DeepMind is looking to the future: to what benefits AlphaStar's mastery of *StarCraft II* could bring to the wider world. Better in-game AI opponents or teammates is a probability, of course, as well as AI's impact on the meta of competitive games. "People tend to worry that this will somehow negatively impact the games; that somehow people will feel their interest will be diminished by the fact that now computers are superior," Silver says. "But what we've seen each time is the opposite: it draws a lot of new excitement for the game. AI discovers new strategies that people didn't know about, new ways to think about the game, fresh perspectives. Pro players have universally said that the most fascinating thing for a pro to do right now is to go and look at AlphaStar, not at human games. It means different ways to learn about the game, different ways to train, different dynamics, different games being developed as AI is used to help the development process during testing and so forth. It's an exciting turning point."

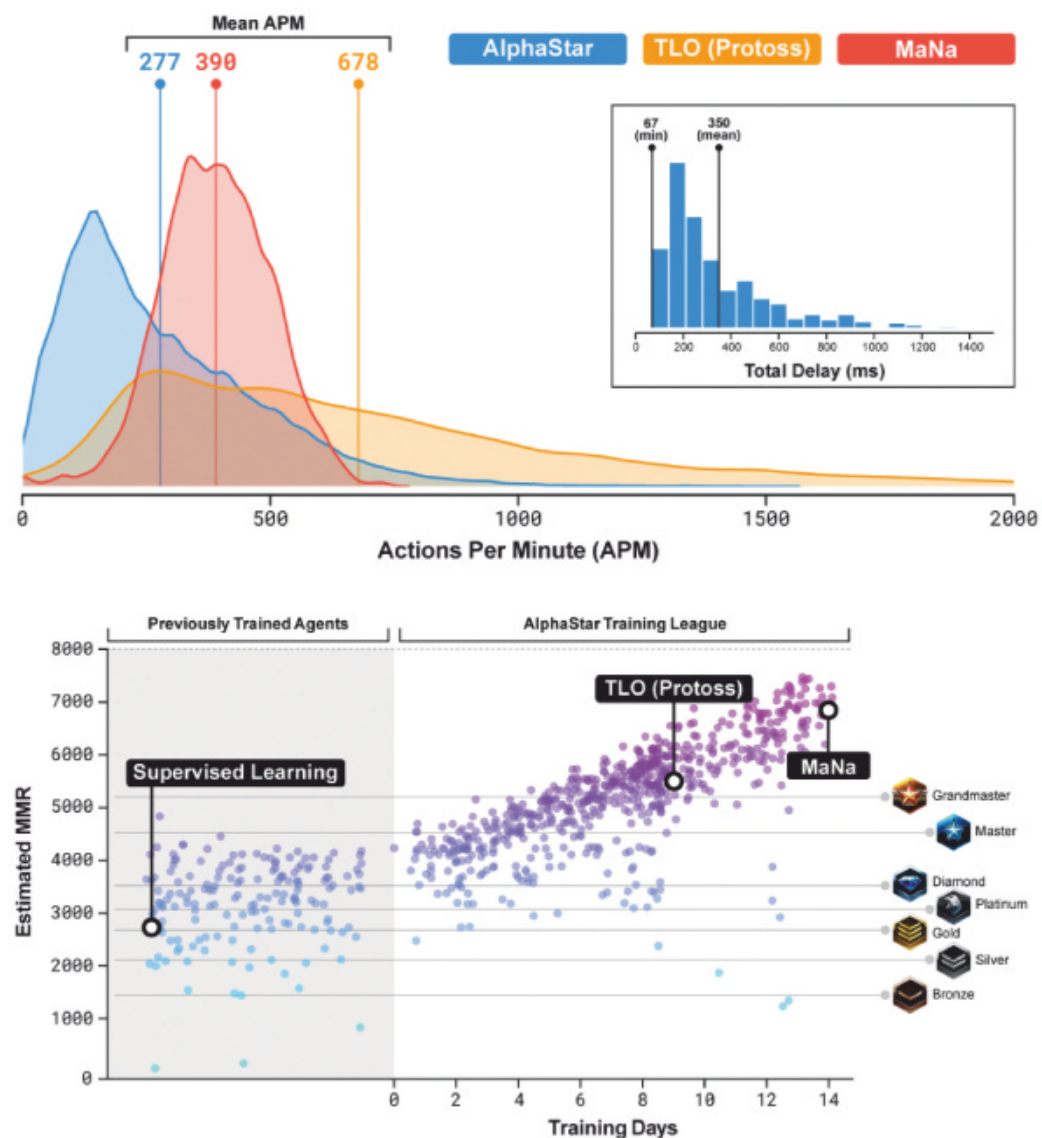
And DeepMind's ultimate goal lies beyond videogames. Videogame AI is a benchmark for us to understand how much progress we're making with general artificial intelligence that can solve a wide





array of society's big problems. "StarCraft II is interesting to us as a challenge because it has some particular difficulties that benchmarks like chess and Go don't have, but which really matter for the real world," Silver says. "It's got a huge range of different strategies, and so you have to find a very robust solution which is able to respond to a very wide range of different corner cases – all the different cheeses which humans can pull, for example. This is kind of similar to how in the real world you might need to deploy an AI in a context where it might be interacting with people who are very unpredictable and you don't exactly know what those people are going to do in those interactions."

The problems that AlphaStar is trained to solve – continuous adaptive strategy and actions, imperfect information, long-term planning and micromanagement – are the same as those involved in long-term forecasting, climate modelling, understanding language patterns for machine translation and text summarisation, and working in safety-critical domains such as energy. The potential end goal, then, is an advanced, widely applicable learning algorithm that's part of moving AI research much further towards the goal of artificial general intelligence. For now, at least, StarCraft II's pro players simply have some new competition to worry about. ■



'Actions per minute' has long been an indicator of skill in StarCraft II. Despite AlphaStar's APM being throttled to a paltry 280, its precision clicking and lack of human error is still an advantage. Issues of fairness will doubtless be debated hotly

This graph neatly showcases the two stages of AlphaStar's development. On the left is the progress of agents trained via learning based on game data; the right side shows the rapid evolution of the AI as the reinforcement learning phase began, and how short the time between the AI beating TLO and MaNa was



# Play it forward

Yorkshire Games Festival and BAFTA team up to  
inspire the next generation of game developers

Speaking to a rapt audience at The National Science and Media Museum in Bradford, Rami Ismail briefly pauses his talk to ask a question: "Who here has shipped a videogame?" Only a few arms are raised. But a sea of hands greets his follow-up, when he asks who is studying or making their first game. Now in its third year, the Yorkshire Games Festival is a young event attracting a young crowd: we're sitting among a new wave of game developers, all keen to learn from those who've already made it.

There can be few better people to inform and enlighten about the vagaries of independent game development than Ismail, and his entertaining A-Z is one of the highlights of the festival programme. Among the other speakers, IO Interactive's Mette Andersen delivers an illuminating talk on how social anthropology inspired the world building of the studio's recent *Hitman* reboots: food for thought for budding level designers. And as Image & Form's Brjann Sigurgeirsson details his studio's rise from a maker of children's games to doing its own thing, attendees are treated to an unexpected scoop: the studio is working on its first non-*SteamWorld* game since 2011's mobile strategy *Anthill*.

But the festival's commitment to youth is most apparent in the Young Developers Conference, created in partnership with BAFTA's Young Game Designers scheme. As the name suggests, it's a programme of activities aimed at young people, and the first of its kind in the UK. For BAFTA's **Melissa Phillips**, who's responsible for all games initiatives related to learning and new talent, it's a sign of how far the

charity's involvement in games has come in ten years. "It started off very basic, a bit like a Blue Peter competition, where you literally posted your entry in the mail," she says. "In the last few years, we've seen a really strong interest from young game designers, but also from parents and teachers wanting to support young people. So how do we facilitate that?"

Its collaboration with the Yorkshire Games Festival offers a number of examples. Its main programme is aimed at 11-to-14-year-olds, helping to teach the basics of game design. The festival offers a parent/teacher workshop, alongside two autism-friendly workshops within a quieter, more relaxed environment, while a family-friendly weekend schedule includes

interactive shows and practical activities. Yorkshire, Phillips says, offers an opportunity to host an event outside London, recognising that the capital gets more attention than the rest of the country. And, by happy coincidence, the most recent winner of the YGD Mentor award, Impact

Gamers' Adam Syrop, hails from Bradford. "When Yorkshire Games Festival asked would we like to come and do something for young developers, we said, 'Yeah, that sounds fantastic.' Because Adam had been a winner recently. And it stressed for us that there weren't many opportunities for his code club in this area."

Cooperative ventures like this can have ancillary benefits for BAFTA: this year's Young Game Designers competition is still open, and it's not hard to imagine a few applications arriving from the festival's younger attendees. But, as Phillips explains, it's not the primary focus. "The

competition is great, but it skims off the best of the best, which we acknowledge. We have a 13-year-old that released an app last year and got 60,000 downloads in the first week. We've got 19- and 20-year-olds now releasing their games professionally with publishers they met through the competition. They're incredibly talented, future BAFTA winners and nominees for sure. But we wouldn't be a charity if we didn't acknowledge that not everybody gets those chances. And when there's a chance to level the playing field you have to take it."

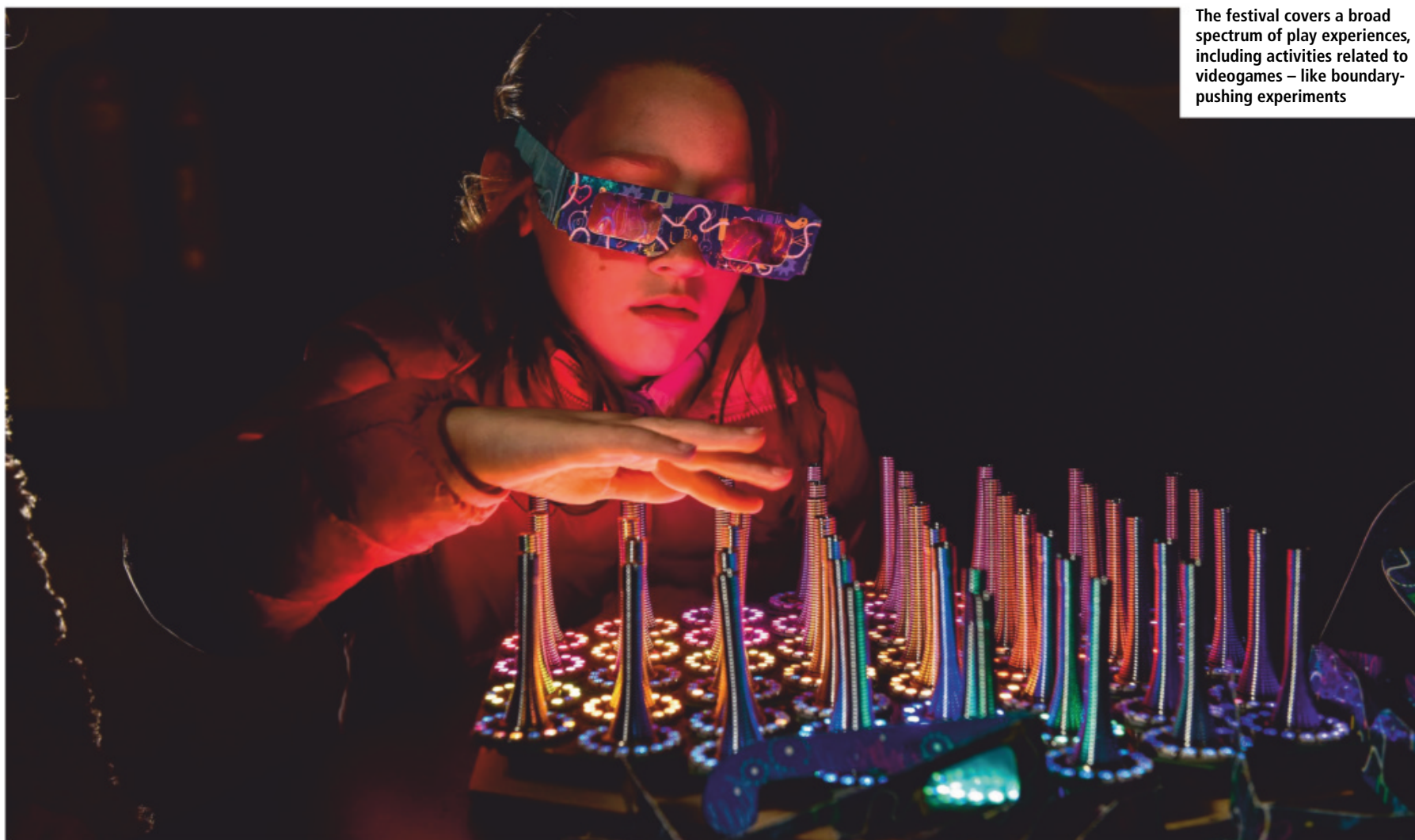
The festival's programme is designed to raise awareness that the game industry supports a variety of skills; that youngsters needn't be put off if they don't have an interest or a background in coding. And it's also helping to encourage potential designers to think about different kinds of games – specifically non-violent ones. As Phillips notes, indie games don't necessarily reach younger players, and most simply want to remake the popular games they're already playing. "I spend a lot of time in these workshops speaking to young people about what a game can be, and redefining those boundaries. I think there's still a lot of entrenched beliefs out there. So a lot of our resources are aimed at moving them away to more original ideas."

There's certainly plenty of inspiration to draw on. And with a weekend careers bar, the Yorkshire Games Festival is as interested in those ready to make the next step in game development as those about to take their first. Through its keen focus on creativity and self-expression, the festival is doing its bit to stimulate the next generation of game developers. We leave Bradford in good cheer – if these five days are anything to go by, the future of the medium is in good hands. ■





The festival covers a broad spectrum of play experiences, including activities related to videogames – like boundary-pushing experiments



YGF's Family Weekend dovetails with BAFTA's desire to encourage parents to learn about games, benefitting more young people in turn



## SHAREWARE

How a design competition can change the world for young people



This year's BAFTA Young Game Designers competition closes on March 13. Those interested in entering can visit [ygd.bafta.org](http://ygd.bafta.org) for all the resources. Phillips has noticed a trend towards more autobiographical elements among recent submissions, revealing young designers are using games to express themselves. "It's something we can certainly work with, especially with children in care," she says. "For a kid, telling an adult about their life can be daunting. But if you say, 'What if we designed a game about your life? What would be the challenges? What would be the goals?' I think that's more interesting."



# First port of call

How a hobbyist modder went from fixing PC games to helping publishers get them right first time

The headlines claimed it took **Peter Thoman** – then known only by his online handle Durante – just 23 minutes to fix the PC version of *Dark Souls*. That legend has now become accepted fact. But while the 80KB download, known simply as DSfix, was indeed available within half an hour of the port's launch, that was only thanks to 30 to 40 hours' worth of preparatory work in the weeks before. Regardless, Thoman found himself suddenly thrust into the spotlight, and a little over six years later, he's managed to parlay his hobby into a fulltime career. Alongside two close friends, he recently founded PH3 Games, a studio dedicated to porting console games to PC.

Thoman was already a keen modder when he made DSfix. A PhD student, he'd been eagerly awaiting the PC release of *Dark Souls* so he could play co-op with his friends who didn't own consoles. When rumours emerged that the PC version would be locked at a resolution of 1024x720, the same as the Xbox 360 version, he laughed them off. "Back then I didn't have that much experience with companies and whatever constraints they might have with a project," he says. "I was just looking at it from a purely engineering perspective. It's very simple for a 3D game on PC to render at an arbitrary resolution. So why would anyone do that?" But when the rumour was confirmed, he set to work. Thoman continued his studies, but worked solidly over evenings and weekends for the following fortnight. So when the game launched, it was merely a matter of making a few final tweaks before the mod could be released.

**"We work independently on consulting tasks, but the core thing we are focused on is engineering"**

If *Dark Souls* was a simple enough fix, *Deadly Premonition* proved the opposite – in particular the dual-perspective scenes where protagonist York is chased by the Raincoat Killer, which required "a very large reverse-engineering effort". The download numbers for this mod may have been dwarfed by DSfix, but the process was both educational and enjoyable for Thoman. "When I play a game and I see something like a really bad shadow artifact where I know that it would be possible to do much better – I mean, it's probably also my problem, but it detracts from my enjoyment of the game," he says.

His selection process for mods wasn't complicated: he'd try to fix the games he liked most. But Thoman had begun to attract the attention of companies looking to bring their games to PC. When they asked if he could help, he had a standard response. "My answer was always: 'Sure. You just have to send me the source code. And secondly you will have to pay me a competitive rate, because it's work and I'm not doing

this for free.'" The money, he says, was never an issue. But most weren't comfortable with the idea of releasing code to someone outside the company's walls. Thoman expected the same thing when he responded to an enquiry from Xseed's executive vice president Ken Berry. "But he immediately came back to me, gave me this NDA and then actually sent me the source," he says. "I actually received a hard disk in the post with everything on it. At that point I was really motivated to figure this thing out."

The game was *Little King's Story*, but Thoman soon realised that the technical

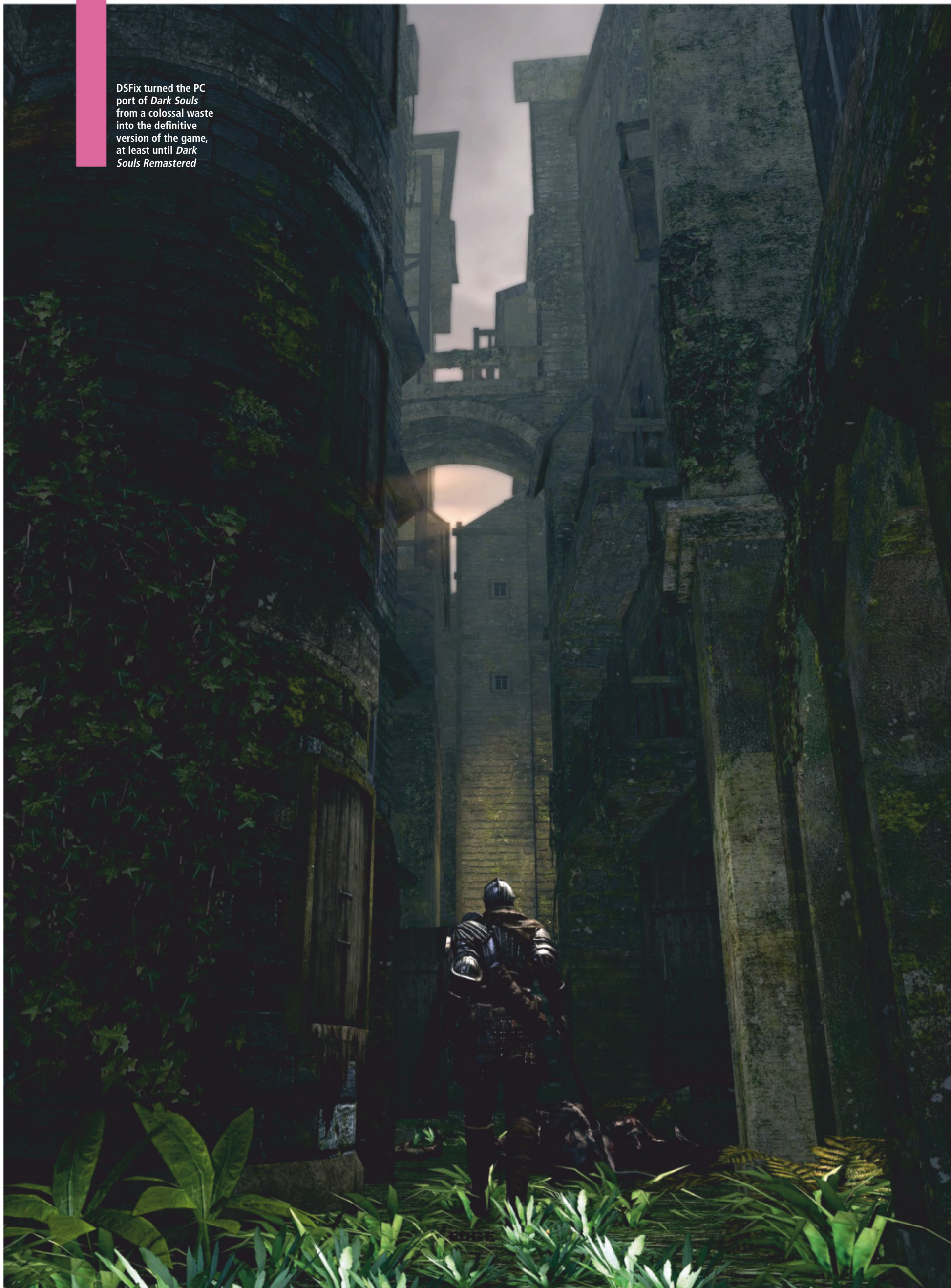
**PH LEVEL**  
Thoman and his colleagues spend a while investigating the source code of a game for a general overview of the work involved – which can vary greatly. "For example, a port to PC from a modern console on an established engine? That's really one guy working for a month or so – it's really not expensive," he says. "But you can have ports that require a whole team working for up to a year, if it's, say, a custom engine made for a large-scale game with different platform-specific dependencies." PH3's job is then to determine a base level of quality for a port and discuss potential additional features that may or may not interest the publisher, before supplying a final quote.

idiosyncrasies of the Wii original made it difficult to port well. There wasn't really a business case for "reimplementing half the game" as Thoman puts it, but he resolved the stuttering issue he'd been invited to fix while improving the rendering quality. Berry was impressed, and approached Thoman again when RPG *Trails Of Cold Steel* was due for PC release. Thoman supplied a number of fixes and technical suggestions for improvements that the porting team could handle; to his surprise, Berry asked if he could do it instead. With no idea how long it would take, Thoman didn't give Xseed a quote, but began to work on it to see how much he could accomplish within "an acceptable timeframe". This was a key moment for Thoman: he realised he could turn this sideline into a career, an idea that crystallised when, for *Trails Of Cold Steel 2*, he was on board from the beginning.

**Now, after clearing** a few bureaucratic hurdles, Thoman has founded PH3 Games alongside two friends with their own specialist expertise. He's keen to clear up misconceptions about the company, primarily that it's a games studio: "We work independently on consulting tasks, but the real core thing we are focused on is engineering. There's no intention for us to create a game on our own – at least at this point." Indeed, he's keen that that PH3 stays relatively small and nimble. "It's good for people who hire us, because we're pretty efficient," he says. "We don't have a lot of overhead. If we were to grow much larger, then our responsibility as founders would change in terms of the whole management aspect of it. And that's not something we're currently interested in. The nice thing for us is that we can still focus on the engineering." ■



DSFix turned the PC port of *Dark Souls* from a colossal waste into the definitive version of the game, at least until *Dark Souls Remastered*







## KNOWLEDGE A MEMOIR BLUE

The character of Miriam is successful, Chen says, but “feels that there is something inside of her that is unresolved. Beyond just the visual contrast, yellow was also chosen as a symbolic colour that represents the character’s determination in a world surrounded by murky uncertainty”





# TIME AND TIDE

How *Cloisters* makes the everyday extraordinary in this tale of inner reflection

For some, nostalgia is a sepia-toned thing – others see rose-tinted recollections. In *A Memoir Blue*, however, it's the cerulean depths of the sea that evoke the past, as champion swimmer Miriam dives into her childhood memory. Its magical realist approach is influenced by Disney animation and the expressive, dreamlike colours of Ridley Scott's films, project lead and artist **Shelley Chen** tells us.

Despite its stylised looks, most of *A Memoir Blue* is concerned with carrying out mundane activities such as buying train tickets, or tuning the radio. "We try to reward players for performing these everyday actions by twisting the reality of the results to surprise them," Chen says. "Haruki Murakami's short stories delight in uncovering beauty in unexpected places. He creates unusual situations that lead the reader to ask questions, and the answer is

withheld in order to draw out the mystery. I wondered how we could achieve that same result not through words, but through interactions and puzzles."

Water, meanwhile, was the ideal medium through which to express *A Memoir Blue*'s central themes. "Water came from the feelings I had when I missed my home, or whenever I was overwhelmed and felt like crying," Chen says. "I felt an invisible force pressed against my chest, just like the feeling of being underwater. Water is formless, but it has a weight that can constrict you, so I felt that it was the perfect element to describe emotions. As Miriam submerges herself into the water, she is also submerging herself in her memories to uncover the truth of her childhood." But you'll have to hold your breath a little longer: *A Memoir Blue* isn't due on PC and mobile until summer 2020. ■



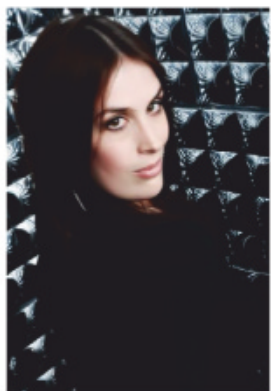
# Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"What a **shameful devolution of our art** these mobile games are. Fitting their noise should be the background sound effects of purgatory."

Clearly no-one has ever introduced **Jeff Minter** to *Puzzle & Dragons*. If you're reading this, Jeff, do get in touch



"I had to wrap a narrative around what was there, which would be **a completely backward way of working** in other entertainment mediums."

**Rhianna Pratchett** recalls being "narrative paramedic" on *Mirror's Edge*



"We did not do a great job of building momentum early in the project... **Our launch didn't resonate** as strongly as we would've liked it to with players."

**Andrew Wilson** cops to *Battlefield Vs*'s disappointing sales performance

"One factor that may be contributing to **the rise in, and intensity of, school violence** is the material kids see, and act out, in videogames."

Absolutely, Pennsylvania representative **Chris Quinn**. These shootings continue to have absolutely nothing to do with guns



## ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



**Game** Chrono Regalia  
**Manufacturer** Sega

Arcade games are typically fast-paced, offering quick thrills in a short amount of time to keep punters moving and paying. As such a realtime strategy game feels like a curious fit for Japanese game centres, but here's Sega's *Chrono Regalia* anyway.

The game is played using a touchscreen – in addition to an arcade version, it's also in development for smartphones – and has you take a party of four into head-to-head battles. It's fairly standard stuff, with a couple of twists, including a super bar that fills up over the course of the match and, when filled, can heal or buff your party, and Climax, a time-manipulation mechanic that sees the game speed up as the battle nears its end.

While primarily a multiplayer pursuit, a singleplayer campaign will show novice players the ropes before they head into versus matchmaking for a pasting. Player data can be saved using Aime, the Sega service that's essentially a multi-game memory card stored either in physical form or digitally on the user's phone.

Launched in Japan in February, a western release seems unlikely, but our interest has been piqued by the launch promo campaign. A host of crossovers with beloved Sega properties are due between March and May, with the predictable likes of Sonic and Kiryu joined by characters from *Phantasy Star Online 2*, *Border Break* and *Sakura Taisen*.







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# My Favourite Game

## Kitty Ray

The rapper and producer on escaping to Los Santos, virtual existentialism and what 'girly' games taught her about herself

**K**itty Ray, or Kitty as she's known professionally, is an American musician whose brand of dreamy pop-rap propelled her to internet stardom, spawned several EPs and led to work soundtracking games. Here, she talks discovering *Mass Effect* via Myspace, the therapeutic nature of *GTAV* and the merits of owning your vulnerability.

### What's your earliest gaming memory?

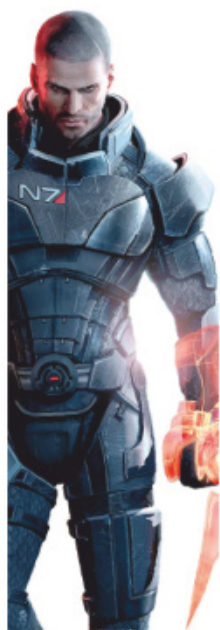
When I was little, my mom was like, obsessed with me being smart. 'We're going to nurture her brain!' So I never really played games or watched a lot of TV – until my little brother was born and then she was like, 'Fuck it'. He was such a handful that she got out my dad's old NES. We sat there and played *Super Mario 3* for like, years. I remember my brother making up his own swear words. Even as a baby, he'd get mad when he lost, so he'd have to make up his own so he wouldn't get in trouble.

### Did your love of games endure?

When I got older, I turned into an emo teen, so I was discovering music and other games at the same time. I'd click through Purevolume and Myspace to look for bands, and one day while doing that I stumbled upon an article about *Mass Effect* – people were pissed off about the sex things in it. I was like 'This sounds awesome!' [laughs]. I wasn't allowed to play it and kept getting caught, so I don't know if I played the entire thing until high school. Then I played *Mass Effect 3* when I was 21, and just kept coming back to it. That's why there's so much *Mass Effect* stuff in my songs.

### SPIN DOCTOR

Having done a remix for the original, Ray was asked to fully soundtrack *Beasts Of Balance's Battles DLC*. "The music is really important, signifying animal combinations, who's winning, the score – everything affects the music, so I had to make a lot, and it all had to fit together perfectly. It was a challenge, but I'm proud of it." Ray's music also features in forthcoming rhythm game *Spin Rhythm*, including one custom track. "It's cool: when you focus on the game, you're actually focusing on the song. When I was writing mine, I was thinking about something that would be fun to spin and lose yourself in."



### How did your relationship with games change as your music career took off?

I was in college when my music career started. I wasn't really into games then – I moved to New York and didn't have a console. Then my music sort of stopped being popular on the internet, and I was like, 'Well, shit'. So I went and got an Xbox 360 and *GTAV*. It's so easy to lose yourself in it because there's so much going on. You spend so much time being another person, it's like you're not even you any more. Even now, if life gets too much, I don't bother with other games – I mess around in *GTA Online*.

### It's surprising you're into shooters – your music is soft and non-aggressive.

Honestly, now that I produce all my music myself with my own sounds, I notice what I think sounds good sounds like stuff from *Animal Crossing* and *The Sims*. Most people assume I'm into cute RPGs, but I have really bad ADHD so I get really bored with shit like that. I always wish that I could get into like a good, sexy RPG. I just can't focus long enough. I can't do *Final Fantasy* at all!

### There's a stereotype about women liking cute games. Sometimes people don't take them seriously. Do you get the same thing with your music?

Oh, I do. I used to be really self-conscious, feeling like people were judging me for being soft or vulnerable. I spent the first few years of my career

defending myself constantly against everybody. Looking back, I really should have chilled out! But I've always been weird and into cute stuff. I'm never really inclined to be making songs about sex or drugs. That stuff is a normal part of my life, because I'm a normal person, but it just doesn't make it into my music. So yeah, a lot of people don't take me seriously, and think it's watered down or something. But I don't really think about that any more. I think it comes down to misogyny. *Animal Crossing* used to be like, a 'girly' game. Now it's cool to be repping that stuff, which is nice. But it

definitely took a lot of people telling a lot of other people to shut up.

### What's your favourite game of all time?

The game that's impacted me the most, that I think is the most representative of who I am, is probably

*Mass Effect 3*. I felt very emotionally connected to it because of how angry everybody was about the ending. I really liked the ending *before* they changed it, the philosophy of it. People got mad: 'I worked on this entire game for nothing?' and it's like, dude, yeah, that's what videogames are! You do all this work, and it's just a game. And that really bothered everyone. I like to smoke a bunch of weed and think about what BioWare was trying to say. Everything about the story in general was sort of existential. It's a corny, silly soap opera set in the future with this wildly dark theme, and I feel like that's very me. ■



Ray's other projects include American Pleasure Club and The Pom-Poms, both of which her husband Sam (aka Ricky Eat Acid) is part of. Her new solo album, *Rose Gold*, releases this spring



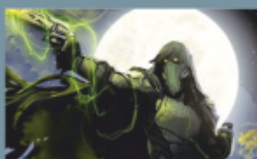


## BOOK

### Zach-Like

[bit.ly/zachlike](http://bit.ly/zachlike)

This is exactly what we'd have expected a book from the maker of mechanical puzzle-programming game *Opus Magnum* to look like. Zach-Like is a hefty 400-page paperback filled with intricate, annotated design documents from every one of Zachtronics' games, from *Exapunks* to *Infinifactory*, plus unreleased and unfinished games. There are sketches from lead designer Zach Barth's installation-based college projects, and even a cluster of pencil-and-paper puzzle games that never made their way anywhere else. It's a veritable encyclopedia of Zachtronics' primary material, then (if you're looking for narrative history or game-design theory, you won't find it here), and although a niche collectible has smashed its Kickstarter target. A full free PDF will release online at a later date.



## VIDEO

### Destiny Lore: Thorn and The Last Word

[bit.ly/gunlore](http://bit.ly/gunlore)

In case you'd ever forgotten how seriously *Destiny* takes its guns, British YouTuber Byf's hour-and-a-half-long lore video is here to remind you. It delves into the storied past of two of the game's most infamous Exotic hand cannons – Thorn and The Last Word – and supplements in-game material with original art, animation and voice acting. Happily, Byf's editing and knack for spinning a yarn balances out his bizarre attempt at a 'storyteller' voice: weaving together Bungie's tangled narrative threads is no mean feat, even if the result is the length of most feature films.

## WEB GAME

### A Dance Of Fire And Ice

[bit.ly/dancefireice](http://bit.ly/dancefireice)

It seems there's no end to the ingenuity of 7th Beat Games. This time, it's the simple brilliance of *A Dance Of Fire And Ice* that has our attention, another one-button rhythm game where you control the path of two planets orbiting each other in a clockwise direction. You tap in time to have each planet hit the next square perfectly – paths become longer, add modifiers and throw in complex turns to alter the rhythm. It's an intuitive blend of geometry and rhythm: soon enough, it becomes an exercise in sight-reading as you start to predict your planets hitting their mark later or earlier depending on the angle of corners. This free browser demo is a generous slice of the full release, which boasts a fancier graphical style, more levels and extra features – and costs just a couple of quid.



# THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

## GRAPHICS CARD

### Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060

[bit.ly/nv\\_rtx2060](http://bit.ly/nv_rtx2060)

Nvidia is rather in the habit of proclaiming the arrival of next-gen gaming; that is, after all, the best way of getting PC players to upgrade to this fiscal quarter's newest GPU. Yet with the RTX 2060, the company's proclamations feel entirely reasonable. The headline feature is ray-tracing, which takes lighting effects to dizzying new heights – but arguably the bigger leap forward is what Nvidia calls Deep Learning Super Sampling, or DLSS. A neural network analyses the component parts of a scene, identifies objects that are repeated, and saves on processing power accordingly – Nvidia reckons the 2060 is more capable of more than doubling the performance of the three-year-old 1060. Frustrating news for those who only recently upgraded, no doubt, but that's PC gaming for you. At least in a couple of years the £350 price tag will have come down a bit.



## continue quit

### Mech up

Vince Zampella says something *Titanfall*-shaped is coming...

### Flight of fantasy

NoCode has to make pigeon fighting game *Pekken*. Twitter's all right

### Instrumental parts

*Fortnite* creative mode players are building musical obstacle courses

### Pay tribute

*Apex Legends* is full of *Overwatch* references and shrines to devs' pets

### Triple down

...but it won't be *Titanfall 3*. We'll clear space on our phones

### Grounded

Accident-prone *Anthem* DDoS-es itself during its first demo weekend

### Board silly

Activision lays off 800 back-office staff – after a record fiscal year

### Apple pay

A French teen snags a PS4 for £8 by weighing it as fruit as the checkout



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# DISPATCHES

## APRIL



Issue 329

## Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to [edge@futurenet.com](mailto:edge@futurenet.com). Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation®Plus

## Desired state

At the end of last year my wife and I went through some upsetting news.

This may not seem relevant to **Edge**, but hopefully it gives some colour to what the subsequent era held. During this time, and particularly during long stretches waiting for news, I found escapism in three games which I played excessively. I found these three titles as somewhat solace from or, to an extent, mindfulness for dealing with our situation. The first was *Yakuza Kiwami 2*, which transported me to a different place and time, and allowed me to gain an absolute form of escapism.

The second was *New Super Mario Bros U Deluxe*, which particularly at the last stages of our situation gave me a 'here and now' reflex status that took me out of the situations where I was waiting.

The final was my constant throughout, *Homescapes*, for Android and iOS. A game where you consistently 'fix' things, and make your life better through home repair – as if fixing something physical fixes something in one's life.

Finding solace in games is something I never really considered before, but one that I can now really empathise with. I hope as 2019 reveals itself, there will be more transportative titles to help us deal with the sometimes harsh realities of life.

**Martin Hollis**

*The healing powers of games are too often overlooked, but *New Super Mario Bros U*? Surely that just made everything worse?*

## Flatliner

So Netflix had its first attempt at (adult-orientated) interactive entertainment, *Black Mirror*'s *Bandersnatch*, and it was totally aimed at your typical **Edge** reader: '80s wave bands, ZX Spectrums and Commodore 64s, LSD trips, a Jeff Minter cameo, heck it's

even named after that highly anticipated British game that was never released.

And what was the episode's theme? Unfortunately, it was that trope I call 'The Stanley Complex', where the player and its character realise that their choices are moot (like in *The Stanley Parable*). This I found rather saddening.

I like to believe that interactive storytelling has amazing, if not beautiful possibilities. *Bandersnatch*, however, opts for a cynical approach. Spoiler alert: there's no good ending. I guess that's why it's a *Black Mirror* episode, a series all about making its viewers feel despair. And maybe that's why it's set in the '80s. The whole premise feels outdated.

Videogames were once usually linked with futile attempts at heroism (consider the fates of *Pac-Man*, *Willy and Jumpman*). But think of how we nowadays consume games. Behold all the fun and glory viewed via Twitch, the adventures created in *RDR2*, the fraternity in the fighting-game community, the exhilaration of doing well in

*Polybius*, the bonds created in *Journey*, etc. Why couldn't Netflix give us a taste of that?

I'm glad to hear that their episode was a success. Can we now move on to what interactive storytelling is really about? Give players/viewers a feeling of agency, creativity, if not emotional expression. The whole premise of *Choose Your Own Adventure* was that you could indeed create your own story, not confront existential angst. Here's to television corporations catching up with interactive entertainment. Maybe they'll one make the choice of using the best parts of videogame culture.

**Robert August de Meijer**

*Well, everything has to start somewhere, and at least Charlie Brooker understands the medium. There's more hope for the future of live-action videogames beginning on p72.*

*"I like to believe that interactive storytelling has amazing, if not beautiful, possibilities"*





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## Sub focus

Such a shame to read that Gustav Dahl will no longer be a subscriber. I'm afraid they'll one day regret it. Of course, we're all busy with trying to consume all that fantastic media, every day in and out, and still having time to actually play the games we're watching/reading about. But I like to see magazines, and especially **Edge**, as a medium that exists on another stratum.

For a couple of years in the past, I didn't care much for videogames, and how much I read magazines reflected that. Luckily I never ended my subscription, because when my love of games returned, I had dozens of glorious time capsules at my disposal to catch up on what I was missing. Going back to older issues is even better when you actively followed videogame culture, and one day later get to travel back in time to relive that excitement and passion. Doing so with online media doesn't do that as well.

Consider the popularity of retro gaming. I sincerely believe that old game mags can give a similar enjoyment of nostalgia, collecting, and amusement. Coincidentally, I was just scrummaging through some old Retro Gamer mags, and found a letter about a reader's delight of rediscovering an own old pile of Zzap! 64 magazines. Heck, there are even videos of people showing the contents of their old periodicals. Good times!

So to those reading this, be wise, keep the future of interactive entertainment being stuffed into your mailbox every month. One day you'll find them in your attic and be the happiest kid on Earth. And marvel at how Nathan found the time to play all that *Destiny*.

**Robert August de Meijer**

[We promise you all Robert is very much real. He just happens to write in frequently to express opinions with which we agree.](#)

## Bad company

I was pleased to see Steven Poole discuss Alfie Bown's *The PlayStation Dreamworld*

(E328), but I was disappointed that he didn't bring up the book's provocative assertion that "computers seem to be highly successful perverts". The meaning doesn't relate to sex, if I've understood it correctly, but instead the author was arguing that in this algorithmic, predictive, games-as-services age computers are "commanding us to desire via the assumption that they are giving us what we want". It seemed very apropos when I turned the page to read the following from Nathan Brown regarding *Destiny*: "I love it when I have a game I can play every day, and that rewards me for doing so, but doesn't punish me if I don't."

In the context of Bown's book, that sounds like an interesting relationship to have with a computer. Are we now willing slaves to perverted AIs of our own creation? Sci-fi prepared me for a lot of technological apocalypses but I didn't count on this.

**Alex Whiteside**

[Our 'esteemed' editor would like to point out there is more to his personality than playing \*Destiny\*. There is also \*Puzzle & Dragons\*.](#)

## Moving fusion

I was surprised to make it all the way through Jonathan Cooper's *Motion Plus*, which comes across as inherently suited for the video essay format, and was presented without colour or flourish. But that's the beauty of the magazine compared to reading online: had I been watching a 30-minute video, I likely would have drowned out the commentary and just been watching without learning.

Instead, I was pleasantly reminded of all the hard work that goes into game development by many different disciplines, having never really considered how much work is put into animation alone. I think it's important to appreciate models don't just magically have physics and character, and that the best, detailed animation comes from carefully crafted work, not procedural interaction between model and environment.

Being a well-considered and fluently written subject, I feel I've learned a better

vocabulary to describe why I find some animation so good, and other animation so bad. So even though I'm not going to put these principles into practice, I can now at least hold a competent conversation with other players and artists about the topic.

I liked the difference between this feature and the *Making Of* with Team Cherry (just started *Hollow Knight*, a well-timed article for me!) on the next page, one being impersonal and striving for technical proficiency, the other a personal account and a retrospective to humanise the medium.

I'd love more of both, and it's why I keep coming back to **Edge**; reviews don't interest me, but this critical analysis and mature appreciation of the industry is best from your writers and editorial team. Thanks!

**Paul Johnson**

[We wondered whether Jonathan's book was a bit too far into the weeds for a generalist audience, but are glad it resonated with you for the same reasons it did us. And since flattery gets you anywhere, enjoy your PS Plus sub.](#)

## Origin unknown

What happened to the pie chart that used to show the game releases for the upcoming month and beyond? Unless I've been having a particularly visceral fever dream, I could have sworn that in previous issues of **Edge** there was a way to preview all the upcoming game releases of the month. Due to my inability to properly organise myself I have always used this to keep tabs on what games would be releasing when, and what would be the best purchases to make for the time being. The review section for already released names simply doesn't cut it for me! Hopefully you'd consider bringing it back because if so it would make my confused brain happy.

**Owen Hiscock**

[Having asked around, we don't believe this has been a thing for about 20 years. If you've lasted this long without it, we reckon you're doing fine. If not, there's always Wikipedia. ■](#)





STEVEN POOLE

# Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

What is a puzzle? The word has become the umbrella term for any kind of videogame challenge that is not exclusively twitchy-kinetic, but it yokes together a huge range of activities. At the basic end, it's a "puzzle" if you have to find the right key for a door, or press a couple of buttons in the right order. At the other end, it is a series of tasks so fiendish that an entire global community of players fails repeatedly at it, and the developer feels forced to dissolve the implicit puzzle contract whereby a prize is withheld until a solution is found.

That is what happened to Bungie earlier this year, when *Destiny 2* unveiled a new area featuring a series of puzzles called Niobe's Torment that players had to solve before getting some paid-for DLC as part of their Annual Pass subscription. The problem was that it was too damn hard, and players collaborating from all over the world, many of them on livestreams, failed to complete its seven levels within the first 24 hours. (To give you a taste: the puzzles involved interpreting ciphers and environmental cues and then performing certain actions: early on, a pair of wings and the letters F, L and Y wanted players to jump while typing, not a combination I ever expected would be useful in any context, real or virtual.) The next day, Bungie announced that it was "decoupling" the puzzles from the prize DLC, which would now be available to everyone. Heroically, the puzzlers soldiered on anyway, and the series was eventually solved by the community after 81 hours, even though — as Bungie then shamefacedly announced — it had been unnecessarily difficult, since a crucial clue on level seven had somehow been "improperly removed" by someone on the team. Thus another part of the implicit puzzle contract was broken: the fairness clause. We're only going to spend our energy on a puzzle if we trust that it is logical and attainable.

The word "puzzle" itself is a puzzle, with the Oxford English dictionary saying "Origin



Does the word "puzzle" itself trivialise the sophistication of some of videogames' best cognitive challenges?

unknown", before pointing to some potential forebears — perhaps it is from Old English *puslian* (to pick out or select), or regional German *pöseln* (to work hard and painstakingly) or *pusseln* (to fiddle about). It originally meant a baffling question, an enigma, rather than something deliberately set to be solved. It is used in this old sense by Walter Scott, who in one of his novels writes of "That ingenious puzzle, called a reel in a bottle, the marvel of children... who can neither comprehend the mystery how it has got in, or how it is to be taken out." Only later in the 19th century did "puzzles"

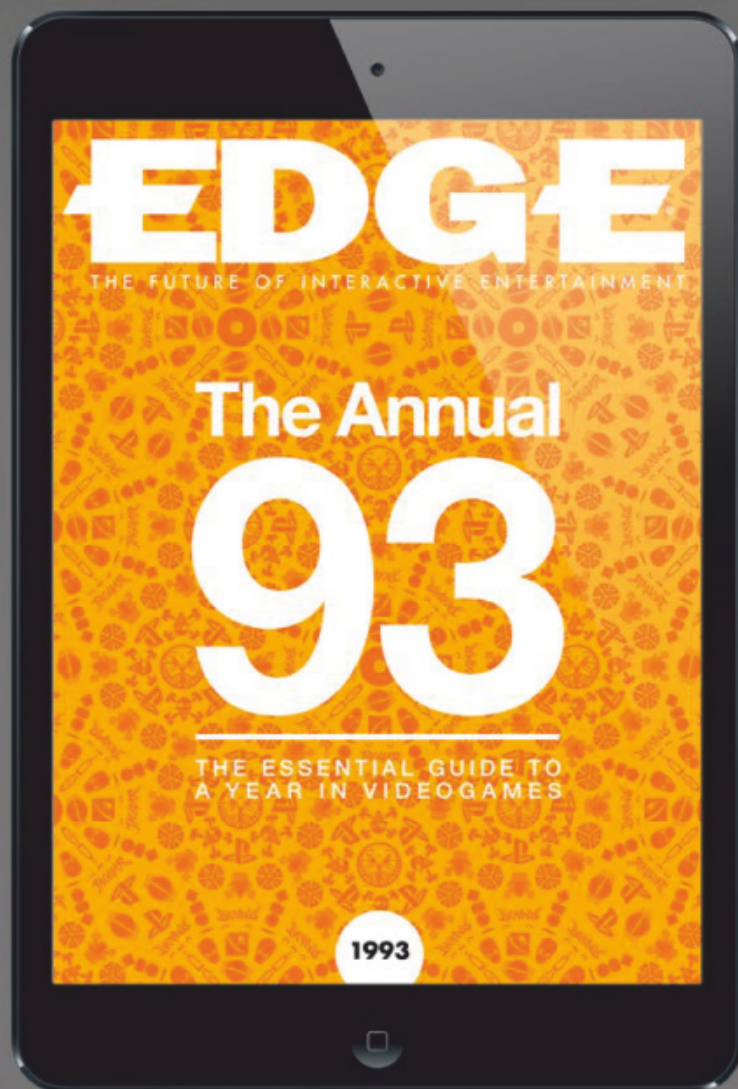
become specifically designed, single-purpose tasks, such as sets of blocks to be fitted together, or word games called "ABC puzzles".

It is strange, to say the least, that so many game puzzles today are direct descendants of those 19th-century magazine posers: connecting dots or shuffling letters hardly takes much advantage of the interactive grandeur of the modern videogame form. But perhaps it is not condescending to point out that, for that very reason, they are easy to populate your game with. To design and engineer the kind of riddle that really befits the medium — I immediately think of all the awe-inspiring environment-mechanical challenges of the early *Tomb Raider* games, as well as some of those before the last reboot, where an elaborate and wonderful space itself becomes a living puzzle — evidently requires far more creative effort. Similarly, in the *Advance Wars* series, every level is essentially a giant puzzle, as is each enemy encampment in *MGSV*, and each assassination mission in *Hitman*. Great videogames, you could say, are puzzles all the time.

Does the word "puzzle" itself trivialise the sophistication of some of videogames' best cognitive challenges? And if so does it encourage developers subconsciously to carry on giving us the same boring letter-cipher, sliding-tile or combination-lock minigames, so that the function of the "puzzle" is simply to mark an impediment to further play, an arbitrary obstacle to be overcome, perhaps a moment to rest your shooting finger without having to watch a bad CGI movie, rather than a pleasurable satisfying conundrum in itself? Certainly in chess, it is assumed that "puzzle" sounds rather childish, and so people speak of specially composed chess "problems" instead, featuring strange positions that require beautiful and counterintuitive ideas to solve. Perhaps if we retired the word "puzzle" from the lexicon of videogames, we'd get better puzzles too.

Steven Poole's *Trigger Happy 2.0* is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at [www.stevenpoole.net](http://www.stevenpoole.net)





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NATHAN BROWN

# Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

As any parent will tell you, one of the good things about having kids is introducing them to the things you love and insisting that they love them too. Christmas is a good time for this, since we have so many little rituals that are great for kids. Once we put the tree up, we light a fire, and sit down in front of Muppets Christmas Carol. This begins a fortnight-long journey through our seasonal favourites (the family-friendly ones, anyway). We've done this for years, long before kids were on the agenda, and it's much nicer now – once we find the film we want. The DVD collection went to charity years ago. Is it on Netflix? Amazon? Now TV? Do we need to (gasp) acquire it on the seven seas? It's a pain.

Yet let's be honest – it is not the end of the world. It is a mere inconvenience. Yet now games appear to be going the same way, some would have you think the sky was falling in. It's always been like this on console: platform holders cottoned on early to the fact that nothing sells hardware like a must-have exclusive game. PC, however, has largely escaped this phenomenon, despite the best efforts of Ubisoft's UPlay and EA's Origin. Steam has remained dominant, and it's fair to say Valve's platform, unburdened by any real competition, has festered.

Until Epic Games came along. Buoyed by the success of *Fortnite*, and with its 200 million players using its launcher, the Unreal Engine maker has sensed an opportunity, and is splashing the cash to make the most of it. Valve managed, briefly, to look like the good guy late last year, when it announced minor changes to how it splits revenue with developers. Within days Epic had made its move, announcing a store with the most developer-friendly revenue model in the industry.

At first it was welcomed almost universally, the PC community acknowledging that Steam's slow decline meant Valve needed a kick up the backside. At its best, Steam wasn't just a platform or a storefront: it was a resource, its carefully curated line-up



Once a byword for quality, Steam has come to embody the worst of PC gaming as much as the best

serving as a fine discovery tool in and of itself. If it was on Steam, it was good. Now, if it's on Steam, it merely exists. Once a byword for quality, Steam has come to embody the worst of PC gaming as much as the best; for every stone-cold banger or hidden classic there are a dozen rubbish Android ports.

Indies had been dissatisfied with Steam for a while, but it has taken Epic to show how that antipathy had spread to the biggest publishers. Yet as the bigger boys have taken up with Epic instead, so the controversy has snowballed. It's fine for small teams to complain about Steam, but when a Ubisoft or

4A Games does it, it's a different matter. The latter's announcement that *Metro Exodus* would no longer be sold on Steam, despite pre-orders having been available there for months, sparked an awful fuss.

It wasn't helped by Valve's petulant, dogwhistle-y claim that the move was "unfair to Steam customers" (rough translation: 'Fly, my pretties!') Nor was it helped by sections of the gaming press that claimed Epic was going about its business in the 'wrong' way. Wrong how? This is the land-grab phase of the Epic Store, and there are only two ways of going about that. Money is surely better than brute force, and while I'd pay plenty of the former to see Tim Sweeney and Gabe Newell in a bare-knuckle cage match over the publishing rights to the next Ubisoft game, I don't think it would be legally binding.

And Valve itself should understand that this is simply how it works – and not just because it once forced people to download a new universal launcher called Steam if they wanted to play *Half-Life 2*. Moreover, Newell has spent the past 15 years presenting his company, and its storefront, as libertarian to its core: Steam is a celebration of free-market economics built on a belief that there is no problem the citizenry cannot solve by itself. It's a noble goal, in a way, but means Valve should understand better than anyone that if someone comes along with the will and the means to make its clients a better offer, they will probably take them up on it.

The gaming audience is sensitive about money, which is weird given that it's an entertainment business on which we happily spent a lot of our disposable income, and how hungry we are for things to be bigger and better, more bold and more beautiful than what we were playing last week. These are issues that keep people awake at night. If Epic's chequebook is Valve's wake-up call, we all stand to benefit, and another launcher on our desktops seems like a small price to pay.

*Nathan Brown is Edge's editor, and if this cheque clears will soon only be contactable through the Epic Games Store*





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ALEX HUTCHINSON

## Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

As soon as the teaser trailer for *Journey To The Savage Planet* hit the internet, we heard a few things. Among the most frequently asked were: why is there no animation in the video, and when will we see gameplay? The first question is easily answered – the video was put together from in-game assets, bubblegum and string, and we didn't have money to splash around – while the second requires some nuance, although the basics are also simple. We weren't quite ready to show gameplay, and we also want to have a rollout of assets so we can build interest over time with a series of (hopefully) newsworthy or shareworthy announcements, instead of dropping everything in one hit at the start.

But now GDC is upon us and we're prepping a demo to show gameplay for the first time, which is probably the most pivotal moment in any game release schedule. It's the first time most people will look at it, and if you do it poorly, it may also be the last.

So as I've explained previously, this will involve me standing awkwardly in a (hopefully spacious) hotel room for nine hours, three days in a row, as members of the press file in, tap away on their phones, briefly raise their eyes, then shuffle out again, usually giving no outward indication of whether they're going to declare your game amazing or awful. This prospect fills me with equal parts dread and excitement. I think we've got the game in a good place, so I'm looking forward to highlighting some of our weirder ideas and hopefully getting a few laughs from the audience. But by the third day of demoing you are usually so bored by your own ideas that it's harder and harder to do your game justice.

More terrifying is that any demo you're presenting will have issues and unfinished areas in it. We remain the only creative industry that starts its press tour before the project is finished, meaning you won't have your full feature set in place, and some of it may be working but not in a fit state to show



Nobody builds a demo thinking they won't be able to ship it, but reality can be cruel in the last months of a project

people who aren't regularly exposed to work-in-progress features.

And even though these days you'll never have a finished build, you should at least prioritise your development to let you establish the two or three features or elements that set your game apart from the horde. For *Savage Planet* it's humour, meaning we need to show player decisions that get consequences that hopefully provoke a laugh, and a combination of platforming and combat against bizarre creatures and crazy map layouts which we hope will look fresh and challenging.

And because the game isn't finished, you're usually unsure as to the exact art specs you're going to be able to squeeze onto your target platforms, meaning you need to be careful about what you show. Nobody builds a demo thinking they won't be able to ship it, but reality can be cruel in the last months of a project and sometimes harsh calls need to be made on art assets.

Even worse is highlighting a gameplay feature you end up cutting, even if the reason it gets the chop is it wasn't actually any good. And this doesn't have to extend to Molyneux levels of design-by-interview. I remember being told many times that the GDC demo for *Spore* was false advertising, despite the fact that the only difference between it and the shipping game was the ability to drag dead bodies with your creature's mouth, which we cut because it had no purpose in the finished game.

And even when you've vetted every corner of your demo, shows like GDC or E3 are barely-managed chaos. People will be late, some bookings run over, some disappear, and some are inserted, so your demo also needs to be flexible. You need to know all the shortcuts in your demo, what you can skip or drag out, and best of all try to target your demo to the audience you have. On *Far Cry 4* we worked incredibly hard to emphasise the player story over the game story, but that meant that we were never going to be the big cinematic experience that some media prefer. In those demos I consciously went out of my way to say that we were not a narrative game in order to try and head off any assumptions that this was something we were trying to achieve.

It's not an exact science, and for me it's as much about managing each demo on the day and seeing what your audience is reacting positively to, but you should only have one goal: to get them to help you put eyeballs on your game when it releases.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick

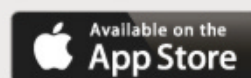


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## THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

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# Both camps

The barrier to success has never been higher. During the production of this issue, EA execs admitted to investors that sales of *Battlefield V* had been disappointing. It shifted seven million copies. Activision, fresh from its split from *Destiny* developer Bungie, has as we send to press announced plans to lay off some 800 staff after what, by its own admission, was a record year for its financials.

For all that they may be seen as its bad guys, the industry would be poorer without these gargantuan companies backing games to the tune of tens of millions. And of course they are going to expect a return on their investment. But with development and marketing budgets on an inexorable rise, games can no longer be solely niche pursuits.

This month's Hype yields a crop of games seeking, in various ways, to break free of their expected confines. *Mortal Kombat 11* (p38) is the latest game to try to crack the eternal puzzle of the fighting-game sequel: adding the new layers of complexity that hardened fans demand, while also making things more accessible for newcomers. In *Phoenix Point*

(p42), strategy-game legend Julian Gollop is also trying to please two sets of people: those who like the hardcore tactics of Gollop's original *X-COM*, and those who prefer the flashy kineticism of Firaxis' latter-day *XCOM*. Both Gollop and Netherrealm are walking different weaves of the same tightrope.

Yet *Dreams* (p34) is seeking to bridge arguably the starkest divide of them all: between those who want to create, and those who simply want to play. Media Molecule may have done it in *LittleBigPlanet*, but this is an entirely different beast. It is a game, if you can call it that, that at once promises everything and nothing at all. One suspects the shiny suits at EA and Activision wouldn't touch it with a bargepole – but somehow, that merely makes it feel all the more special.

## MOST WANTED

**Devil May Cry 5** PC, PS4, Xbox One  
With review code imminent, an invitation to play five hours of Hideaki Itsuno's latest action masterclass at a swanky London junket goes unanswered – it would only make us sadder the full game isn't in our hands yet. We're brushing up on our Royal Guard skills in eager preparation.

**The Walking Dead** PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One  
The name may be forever infected by the sorry demise of Telltale, and to be honest we drifted away from the game a couple of seasons ago. But Skybound's bid to ensure Clem gets the send-off she and the game's remaining fans deserve is enough to earn our attention. Review next month.

**Days Gone** PS4  
The last time this impressed us was the day it was announced: everything since has been woefully generic. But when was the last time Sony made a bad game? Perhaps there's more to Bend's zombie adventure than meets the bloodied eye.





H | Y  
P | E

## DREAMS

Out in the wild, Media Molecule's grand creative vision begins to take form

<b>Developer</b>	Media Molecule
<b>Publisher</b>	SIE
<b>Format</b>	PS4
<b>Origin</b>	UK
<b>Release</b>	2019





2D paintings, like the ones Media Molecule's own artists have made in-engine, are also possible. Most of what we see in the beta takes a playable form: we're looking forward to seeing feature-length films ►





ABOVE This wonderfully detailed sculpt is a functional pool game, although it needs a little extra polish at time of playing. We'd love to see a twoplayer mode, too.

TOP RIGHT Using the game's visual coding system, Logic, is like making a kind of mindmap. It's the key to creating complex interactive elements such as puppets.

MAIN *Dreams* does plenty of the hard work for creators: you can simply paint in animations and effects, such as these glowing windows and streetlamps.

BELOW LEFT A mother chicken waits for the bus with her offspring. If we were to add our own touches or use parts of this scene in another creation, the original artist would be credited, with the game keeping constant track of who's made what.

BELOW RIGHT The *P.T.* remake (rechristened *Loop*) might be fuzzy around the edges, but it's uncannily accurate. *Dreams'* slightly soft, Impressionistic style is visible in most creations, which may briefly help retain the game's identity and feel as creators stretch it into unrecognisable forms







DREAMS

Well, if people didn't know what *Dreams* was before, they certainly do now. After Media Molecule showed us what its latest project was capable of for E316's cover feature, we made our attempt to explain what we'd seen: an ultra-accessible piece of software that allows its user to play, create and share almost anything they can imagine, including games, films, sculptures, paintings, animation sets, artificial intelligence systems and open worlds. But there's only so much that mere words can do for *Dreams*. At some point, eating must prove the pudding.

Then came the recent beta, sporting a strict NDA – which was swiftly kicked to bits by a video making the rounds on Twitter. A note-perfect recreation of *P.T.* within *Dreams*, right down to the dodgy alarm clock, radio chatter and ominously swaying lantern. Part of a *Dead Space* level followed. And, shortly after that, the NDA – rather sensibly – was suddenly no more. It's somewhat bittersweet seeing people only really understanding the potential of a creative game through recreations of things they already know, but those touchstones have suddenly put *Dreams* on the map for a much wider audience.

For now, however, the early converts have been doing a remarkable job. Within minutes of starting up *Dreams*' beta, we're scrolling through a smorgasbord of beautifully realised creations. We start off with a short dip in an submarine scene lit by bizarre alien flora, using our gyro to swim closer to the schools of fish darting around. Our next choice is a *Guitar Hero*-esque rhythm game built around two catchy tracks (composed, naturally, in *Dreams*' inbuilt production studio).

Afterwards, a slick firstperson shooter grabs our attention. *Prometheus*' movement needs a little finessing – but goodness, the LMG is positively beastly, with a very familiar heft to its shots that matches the *Doom*-like soundtrack buzzing in our ears. There are untold evenings of bite-size demos to sample. The prospect of a library of full-length games swiftly spun up at launch, all available at the cost of general admission, is dizzying.

To say nothing of what we're apparently capable of ourselves. Well, once we've cleared a good few tutorials, that is. Trying to start

something from scratch turns out to be difficult, the sculpting menu colourful and friendly but slightly too much to take in all at once. We're struggling with the controls too: moving ourselves and various shapes around the 3D sculpting space involves a mix of the analogue sticks and the DualShock's gyroscope that we cannot seem to master.

**Fortunately, the tutorials** are rigorous and easy to follow (we can also set the pace, rewinding or fast-forwarding through them with a few button presses). One teaches us how to colour objects in a riverside cottage scene and even change the appearance of their texture, before showing us how to paint flowing animations into water, or give the illusion of smoke rising from a chimney in decadent swirls. Another is set up almost like a puzzle game itself, teaching us advanced camera controls by asking us to fly around and

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### ***The prospect of a library of full-length games swiftly spun up at launch is dizzying***

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find hidden clues, or to fashion a bridge by cloning items quickly before walking a character over it.

Soon, we're comfortable enough to get back to our original goal of sculpting an ice-cream. This time, it's a cinch: we conjure up a glass containing three fluffy scoops, two glossy chocolate pretzel sticks and a single cherry (which we spend far too long adjusting to the perfect shine). We're even able to easily set things such as the density of each part of the sculpture, how each bit should react to light, or what the glass should sound like if struck by a player. As we upload it to the Dreamiverse for others to iterate upon, we briefly consider plonking some eyes on and making it into a character –perhaps heading back to that rhythm game and plucking out the metal guitar riff to soundtrack a silly 3D platformer. Maybe we could call it *Licks*. We look at the clock. It's two in the morning. Well, we suppose if *Dreams*' journey has taught us anything so far, it's that sometimes rules are made to be broken. ■



### **Personality development**

Your personal hub space offers a more tangible incentive to explore *Dreams*' various capabilities than simply scratching your creative itch. Whether you're completing tutorials, playing games, watching films, composing a beat, learning the Logic visual coding system or remixing other people's creations into your own, you'll earn rewards. These come in the form of decorative objects – animated sketches and stamps, spiral staircases or giant curved walls – that you can use to personalise your hub. Meanwhile, *Dreams* will monitor what you spend the most time doing as you level up, and will build you a creator profile that helps potential collaborators identify your strengths and level of experience.









The background of the page is a screenshot from the game Mortal Kombat 11. It depicts a scene from the 'Carnage' storyline where the character Scorpion is shown from the waist down, wearing his signature purple and red armor and black boots. He is standing on a dark, rocky ground. In the foreground, the character Mileena is lying on her back, appearing to be in a state of defeat or death. She is wearing her brown and black outfit. The background features a large, ancient stone structure with intricate carvings and a large, gnarled tree trunk. The lighting is dramatic, with a bright light source creating a strong glow and long shadows.

H | Y  
P | E

# MORTAL KOMBAT 11

Once again, Netherrealm's bloodthirsty, showboating brawler plays to the crowd

<b>Developer</b>	Netherrealm Studios
<b>Publisher</b>	Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
<b>Format</b>	PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
<b>Origin</b>	US
<b>Release</b>	April 23, May 10 (Switch)





LEFT In case you're not keeping up with the lore: Raiden has now gone full villain, as evidenced by his newly crimson thunderbolts. BELOW Fan-favourite Baraka is back, and has had some dental work done since his appearance in *MKX*. Indeed, some teeth appear to have migrated to his shoulders



ABOVE As in previous entries, there'll be Towers to fight through for character-specific rewards. This time, some will be timed events, or one-shot summonables. RIGHT Context-sensitive environment attacks return from *X*. Get close to a stray chair here and it might be highlighted, letting you pick it up and use it as a weapon







## MORTAL KOMBAT 11

**A**nother year, another bewildering press event in which we stand amid a crowd that's baying a little bit too enthusiastically for blood. This time, it's somewhat expected: this is *Mortal Kombat 11*, after all. Netherrealm's fighting-game series has always done a roaring trade in the kind of ultraviolence even Charles Manson might have deemed a little much. Indeed, as we watch people laugh themselves hoarse at Baraka peeling Sonya Blade's face like an onion before shish-kebabbing her brain and eating it, it's apparent little has changed.

If you still derive a thrill from watching computer-generated torsos be pulled apart like wet bread, *Mortal Kombat 11* has you covered. But in other ways there's plenty of progress on display. The animation quality has drastically improved, and not just when it comes to the series' famed Fatalities. While there will likely always be a stiffness to *Mortal Kombat*'s staccato combos, polish has been applied to some of the series' shonkier edges. Characters follow through with their blows, selling the impact of each hit; combos, meanwhile, are finally approaching fluidity – particularly in the case of returning fighter Skarlet, whose blood-conjured whips and scythes flow gracefully into various forms alongside our button-presses.

**With the new** Crushing Blow mechanic, there's more variation in the cadence of matches. They're one-use-per-match moves, standard attacks that deal substantially more damage in specific contexts (landing it on the other side of an opponent in a mix-up when they're blocking the wrong way, for instance). They also trigger the kind of slow-mo zoom-in effect you'd expect from *Mortal Kombat X*'s X-Ray super moves – treating us to an even more invasive look at Baraka's dental work when our opponent tries to counter our nonexistent throw, our foot colliding with his face. The sudden change of pace is entertaining enough at first, although it may become tiresome when interrupting the flow that the game is working to build during rounds. Ultimately, *Mortal Kombat* has always maintained a philosophy of style over substance, and all the evidence so far suggests it's finally got the chops to back that up.

While substance might not send roomfuls of people into a hollering frenzy, it's the hallmark of a truly accomplished fighting game. But the replacement of a single meter system with dual bars – one for offensive moves, including high-damage EX attacks, one for defensive moves such as dodges and rolls – is intriguing. The meters are full at the start of a match, and are recharged at a rate that reflects the power of the move we've just used. Powering up Sonya's Energy Ring projectile sees our meter refill quickly; using Geras' remarkably irritating match timer-altering spell, however, means we're without meter for the rest of the round (and rightly so; we feel positively dirty). Once we're consciously managing the meters, most of our matches are a close-quarters back-and-forth of experimental pokes and prods, until someone inevitably forgets to hold the block button and the nastier blows start flying in a

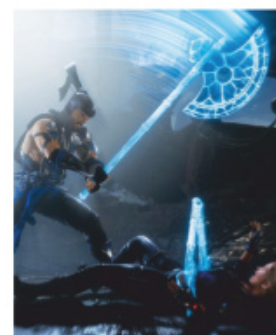
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### **Characters follow through with their blows; combos are finally approaching fluidity**

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race to capitalise on the mistake.

Otherwise, it seems *Mortal Kombat 11* is content to set player creativity aside in favour of the usual pantomime drama. The new Fatal Blow mechanic means well, offering you a grisly comeback-style move when your health falls below 30 per cent. Presumably, it's an attempt to bring super moves back into play (in *MKX*, players would often spend the required meter on EX moves instead). But if it's blocked or missed, the Fatal Blow runs on a five-second cooldown before it can simply be tried again – ad infinitum. The final third of your health bar, then, tends to become a predictable sort of place, the desperate jousting flattening out the previously varied pace that the other mechanics work so hard to build. Given that it's a clear opportunity for Netherrealm to showcase yet more lavishly rendered impalements, there's a definite sense that the series' true motivations still lie in giving edgy teenagers something to gawp at. Personally, we'd like something a little more to cheer about. ■



### **Splice of life**

Variations return in *Mortal Kombat 11*, allowing you to select from one of three sets of attacks and abilities for your fighter. But you'll also be able to tweak each variation further with custom character variations that will use gear (as in Netherrealm's excellent system in *Injustice 2*). According to the studio, the options are largely weighted towards the cosmetic, but with consumables and weapons also in the mix we'll inevitably start to see a metagame evolve online – presumably in a separate mode so as not to anger purists, as studio creative director Ed Boon has promised "regulation" versions of each character for more serious tournament-style play.





H | Y  
P | E

# PHOENIX POINT

25 years on, X-COM's creator hopes  
to evolve the genre further

<b>Developer/publisher</b>	Snapshot Games
<b>Format</b>	PC, Xbox One
<b>Origin</b>	Bulgaria
<b>Release</b>	2019

**J**ulian Gollop's latest game is facing a rather unusual challenge: existing within two separate legacies, and needing to satisfy both at once. There's the one that goes back a quarter of a century, to 1994's *UFO: Enemy Unknown* (commonly known as *X-COM*, its US title), and the much more recent lineage spawned by Firaxis' 2012 *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*. The two might share a name, but they have distinct audiences, each with their own demands – as Gollop, whose Snapshot Games has funded *Phoenix Point*'s production through a mix of crowdfunding and early-access preorders, is all too aware. "There are basically two groups in our backers. There are those who want something more like the original *X-COM* but spruced up," he says. "The other camp is people who want [things to work like] the Firaxis *XCOM*. And then there are a few people in the middle, who want some mixture of both, somehow."

He's talking specifically about the game's approach to character classes, which were absent from the original but a major part of the reboot – but it applies to almost every element of *Phoenix Point*. The tactical battles in particular show the influence of Firaxis and the way it managed to, in Gollop's words, "make turn-based strategy games sexy again". There's more than an echo of *XCOM*'s slick cinematic presentation in, for example, the smooth pan

of the camera as it slides from soldier to soldier, each rattling off overwatch shots.

At first glance, it might be too close – the visual style, interface and even the majority of keyboard shortcuts will be immediately familiar to anyone who has played the Firaxis games. But prod *Phoenix Point*'s systems a little more firmly, and the divergence from that formula starts to become apparent. The headline feature is the ability to zoom in with the mouse wheel when firing, targeting individual body parts. Damage a gunner's arm and it might be unable to fire a weapon or toss a grenade. Blow a leg off that Crabman advancing on your soldiers, pincers snapping, and its charge will be reduced to a hobble.

This is the just most prominent example of *Phoenix Point*'s simulationist approach to gunplay. It's ditching the abstracted dice rolls to determine whether a shot hits or misses – something that can mean a soldier standing one square away from a target, its shotgun practically tucked under the alien's chin, still misses the shot. Instead, it calculates a path for each bullet, tracing it through anything that blocks the line of sight – including your own team members. Gollop talks gleefully about realistic ballistics and bell-curve distributions, and how it recalls the 3D collision simulation of the original *X-COM*, but all you really need to know is this: in the zoomed-in Free Aim ►



Julian Gollop,  
co-founder of  
Snapshot Games



*Phoenix Point* currently has a single boss, the enormous Alien Queen, who mutates over the course of the game





The ability to target individual body parts has impacted enemy design. A Crabman with one pincer mutated to form a shield requires you to position yourself carefully to shoot around its built-in cover





## PHOENIX POINT



By the time of launch, *Phoenix Point* is promising extensive character customisation for each soldier in your squad, but this is not yet present in the build we test

mode, you're shown two concentric circles. Every shot you fire will land somewhere in the larger circle, roughly half of them inside the central bullseye. This allows you to do things such as sneak a shot through narrow gaps in the scenery or catch the single alien appendage that's poking out of cover, adding an extra layer of finesse to even the smallest decision. Because the spread of shots widens as you get further from the target, and varies hugely depending on weapon class, there's a much clearer difference between a sniper rifle and a short-range automatic.

Every successful hit is followed by a string of tiny updates that reflects this stats-first approach: not just the amount of damage, but which body parts were disabled or equipment damaged, whether the target is bleeding or took a hit to their willpower. "There are players who like and demand lots of stats – percentages, damage types, all this kind of stuff – and then there are other players who are much more

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### **"From about 1999, I've been trying to find ways to evolve the big X-COM idea"**

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visually inclined. They just want to see some simple information, clearly represented, about the likely outcome," says Gollop. So how does the team find a balance between old and new, complex and streamlined? "With lots of arguments and testing, I guess." It's telling that, on the question of character classes, Snapshot landed on a compromise: each character can dual-class, with an additional personal progression track of randomised abilities – the simplicity of one game's systems, without giving up the other's breadth of choices.

As far as Gollop is concerned, though, neither the first *X-COM* or any of Firaxis' reimaginings are the main influence on *Phoenix Point*. He points instead to *The Dreamland Chronicles: Freedom Ridge* – a game which was cancelled during development, resulting in the 2001 closure of Gollop's Mythos Games studio. "Some of the ideas from *Dreamland* are actually in *Phoenix Point*," he says. "You could say that, from about 1999, I've been trying to find ways to evolve the big *X-COM* idea." That evolution comes in the strategy meta-game

that exists outside of the individual battles, and how the two interact. This is the real link between *X-COM*, *XCOM* and *Phoenix Point*: what Gollop calls "the concept that the battle you're fighting is part of this bigger context, and what feeds into the strategy layer will also feed back into the tactical layer, which is that core addictive game loop."

**Gollop's proposed evolution**, which he first experimented with in 1997's *X-COM Apocalypse* and was advancing in *Dreamland Chronicles* until its cancellation, is to make pushing against AI opponents as big a part of the strategic game as it is the tactical battles. The main strategic opponents in *Phoenix Point* aren't the amphibious alien forces, but your fellow man. There are three factions living in the outposts scattered across the game's 'geoscape' map of Earth, all with their own objectives and diplomatic relationships with the player and each other. The difficulty is that, for now, the strategic game is something of an iceberg. In the build we play, only the tip of what Gollop promises is visible. There's a geoscape you can fly your jet around, uncovering faction-owned or independent havens which might need protecting, abandoned bases from your own Phoenix Project which can be raided for resources and other points which immediately trigger tactical missions. Fuel is a constant concern – run out and your jet won't be able to make it back to base, requiring resources to fill up or build a refuelling station. Beyond that, as well as the usual base building, Gollop talks about economic systems, and taking inspiration from grand strategy games like *Civilization* and *Stellaris*. Call it a 4*X-COM* game. But most of these big ideas are currently hidden beneath the waters of development.

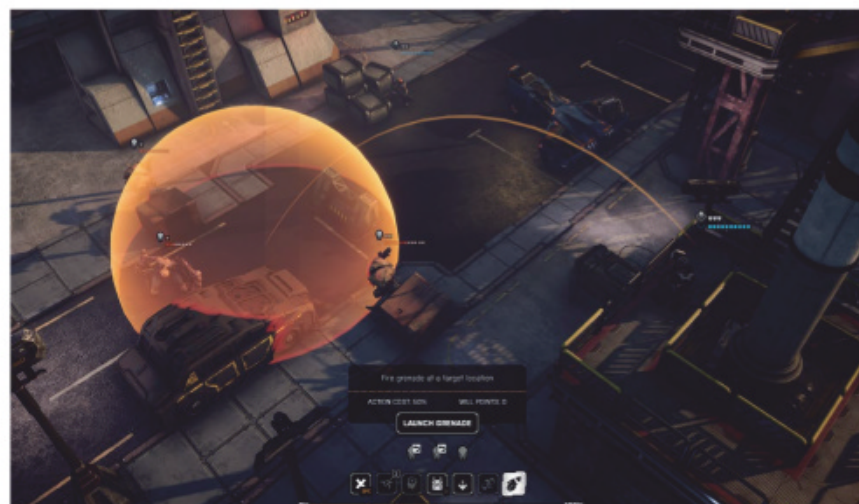
As these games are rooted in the interplay between their two layers – and because that's the particular aspect Gollop is trying to advance – this obfuscation makes it harder to gauge the tactical game. It's a solid foundation, yes, but how satisfying each mission is relies on that broader context, the attachment to individual soldiers or the resources being wagered on the outcome of a battle. If the strategy level can live up to its promise, *Phoenix Point* could break free of its legacies – both of them – and create something genuinely new. ■



### **The wisdom of crowds**

*Phoenix Point* owes its existence to the 10,314 backers who helped its Fig campaign raise over \$765,000, and the tens of thousands who have preordered the game in exchange for early access to regular 'backer builds' of the game. Before the crowdfunding began, a survey helped Snapshot decide a multiplayer mode wasn't worth pursuing – so how much do these backers affect development now? Gollop says the funding has mostly been invested in expanding the art team, to help it better compete with the slick presentation of Firaxis' games, but the scope of the game hasn't changed significantly as result. As for player feedback, it certainly seems to have influenced decisions such as how to approach characters' classes, but hasn't led to "any major changes in the game's design."





TOP Despite the efforts to present combat cinematically, each attack is followed with a feed of detailed updates. ABOVE LEFT Vehicles are another of *Phoenix Point's* additions to the classic *X-COM* formula. ABOVE RIGHT Each action has a cost, either draining a soldier's action bar, which refills each turn, or will points, replenished by completing objectives. LEFT The granular aiming system comes into its own when facing larger enemies, where there are more options to target





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# STEAMWORLD QUEST

Image & Form brings us a card-  
battling RPG with a tasty twist

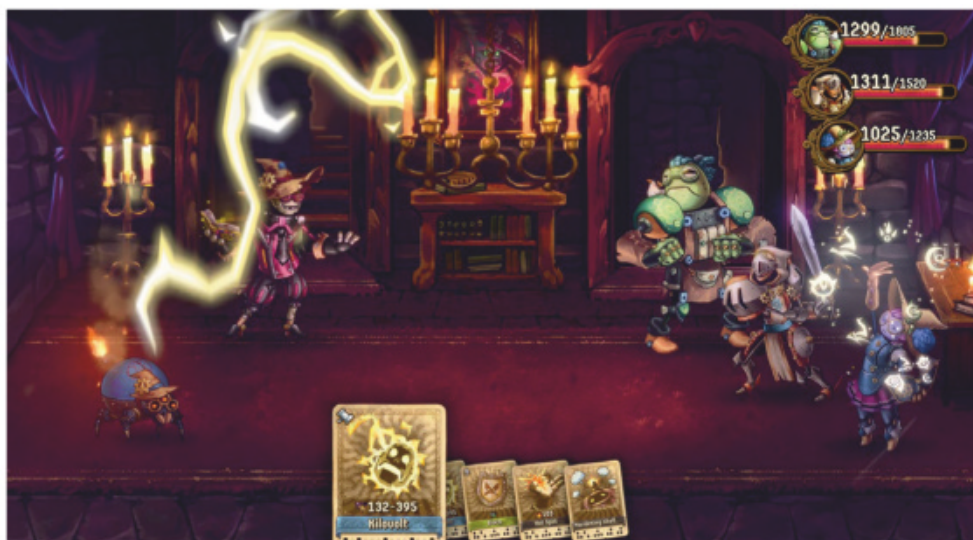
Developer/publisher	Image & Form
Format	Switch
Origin	Sweden
Release	Spring



If *SteamWorld Quest* has a lead protagonist, it's Armilly the knight. "She has the most obvious quest," Sigurgeirsson says. The story is about what it takes to be a real hero







TOP Copernica's spell book lets her do magic, but it's weighty enough that in the early stages she'll whack enemies across the head with it.  
ABOVE If you're feeling flush – no pun intended – you can buy more cards from local store owners



TOP Officially, there are more than 100 cards to collect, but Sigurgeirsson doesn't give us an exact number, beyond saying "very many."  
ABOVE Sigurgeirsson plays a lot of RPGs, but admits to rarely finishing them. With that in mind, *Quest* is aiming to cut grind to a minimum. "We want you to be playing all the time, and still get around 15 hours out of this."  
LEFT Image & Form aims to blend physical comedy with more sophisticated humour, including a few deep-cut references. Sigurgeirsson: "You have the animations where it's just innocent fun. And then there's – and pardon me for saying so – a highbrow tastiness to some of it. I think it's a good mix. I hope it's a good mix"





## STEAMWORLD QUEST

**S**teamWorld Quest began as a devious bit of misdirection. Having written several successful grant applications for EU funding, Image & Form's CEO and figurehead **Brjann Sigurgeirsson** was confident his next application would be accepted. But that meant the name of the game would probably get out, and he didn't want the world to know his team was working on *SteamWorld Dig 2*. "The EU has an obligation to make the name of the game public, so I gave it a really broad name that could be anything," Sigurgeirsson tells us. "And then of course someone found out and posted on Twitter that we had gotten the grant: 'Oh! Image & Form's next game is *SteamWorld Quest*.' And then *SteamWorld Dig 2* came out a year after that."

So when it was time to think up another game idea, the title was a no-brainer. It was the end of 2016, and it seemed development on *SteamWorld Dig 2* was nearing its end – though, as it turned out, the game's planned submission date of April the following year slipped to August. The following January, Sigurgeirsson arranged for an internal pitch session where all staff could work on ideas either alone or in groups before presenting them to the rest of the studio in the hope that there'd be a consensus. "One of the two ideas that really worked was the basis for *SteamWorld Quest*," he says, hinting that the other game might also see the light of day. "But in the beginning it was actually quite different. *SteamWorld Quest* the way it is today is not the game we were looking at from the very beginning."

**So what changed?** "Oh, only the core gameplay mechanic, that's all," he deadpans. *SteamWorld Quest* was always going to be a roleplaying game, but the idea of a card-battling system wasn't present at the start. "We might make a game from that original idea as well, so I'm not going to tell you what it was," Sigurgeirsson says. "But we kept looping back to the card battles in discussions." The team collectively decided to take a few weeks to explore the idea a little more, and everyone seemed happier with the way the game worked.

As with the studio's previous games, it's a genre piece with a twist. Just as *SteamWorld*

*Dig* took the Metroidvania in new directions and *Heist* added realtime aiming to the turn-based strategy, *Quest* is an RPG that wants players to get to the good stuff quicker. It's a matter of trimming the fat – here, there's no real overworld exploration, and you shouldn't expect lengthy cutscenes either. Rather, your three robots (Armilly the knight, Copernica the mage, and tank/healer Galleo) will wander along a series of side-scrolling environments, with the story progressing through party chatter and dialogue with friendly NPCs, between card-based battles with the various monsters that cross their path. "You combine the individual decks of each character into the hands you're dealt," Sigurgeirsson explains. And while you'll start with only a handful of rudimentary cards you can play or shuffle, before long you'll amass a versatile deck that lets you combine them in clever ways to deal more damage.

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***There's no real overworld exploration, and you shouldn't expect lengthy cutscenes either***

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*Quest* is surprisingly close to being feature-complete – a release date announcement should be imminent as you read this – though the developer is keen to spend a little while ensuring it's balanced for all types of player. Sigurgeirsson wants the game to be accessible to those unfamiliar with the genre, while allowing plenty of depth and nuance for "people who want to sit and calculate damage totals."

Other versions are in the offing, but having first found its audience on Nintendo hardware, it's no surprise Image & Form is bringing *Quest* to Switch first. And the studio ultimately has a very Nintendo-like goal in mind. "One of the best comments you can get is when someone says, 'This is typically the kind of game that I hate or that I skip, but I think from now on this might be a genre I explore further,'" Sigurgeirsson says. "Before you tried our food, you said you didn't like broccoli. But now?" He laughs again. "It's a shitty analogy, but we want to make people explore new things, and like new things." ■

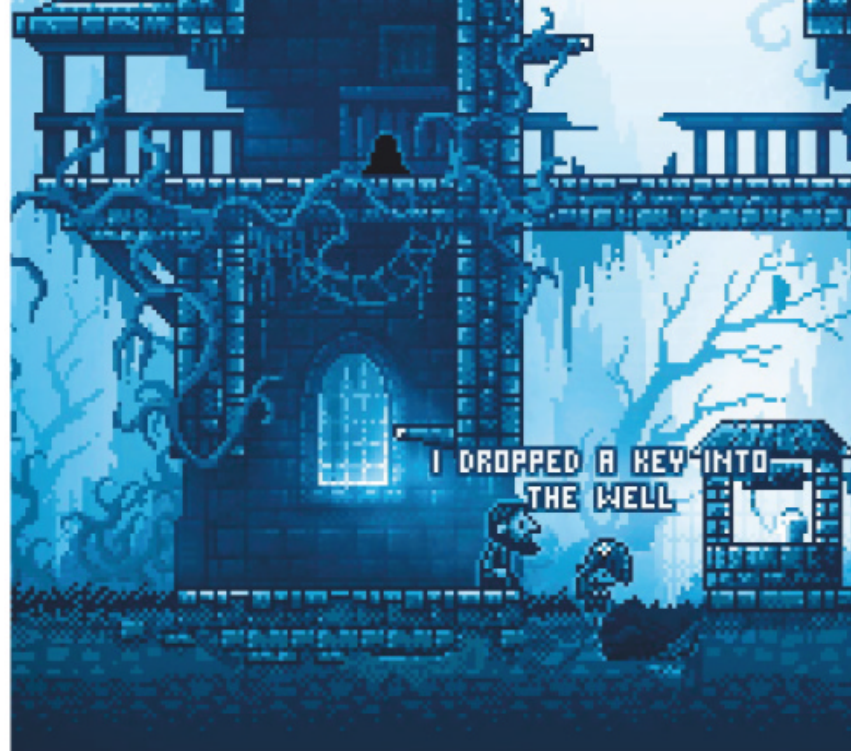


### The hole deck

The cards are styled like punch cards, in keeping with the *SteamWorld* lore that imagines an alternate universe where inventor Charles Babbage's steam-powered computers were successful. Inevitably, there were complaints that the perforations appeared identical, but Sigurgeirsson is happy to clarify that these were placeholders, and the final cards will carry individual patterns. As for the *SteamWorld* timeline, the medieval fantasy setting takes the series from implausible scenarios to an impossible one, though that was part of the appeal – "It's so dumb that we really felt we should do it," he says – and the game will derive much of its humour from the fish-out-of-water contrast. "We're flirting with a particular movie and as soon as you see the intro you'll understand right away where we took the inspiration for all this."



**Developer**  
Hidden Layer Games  
**Publisher** Chucklefish  
**Format** PC, Switch  
**Origin** Lithuania  
**Release** 2019



## INMOST

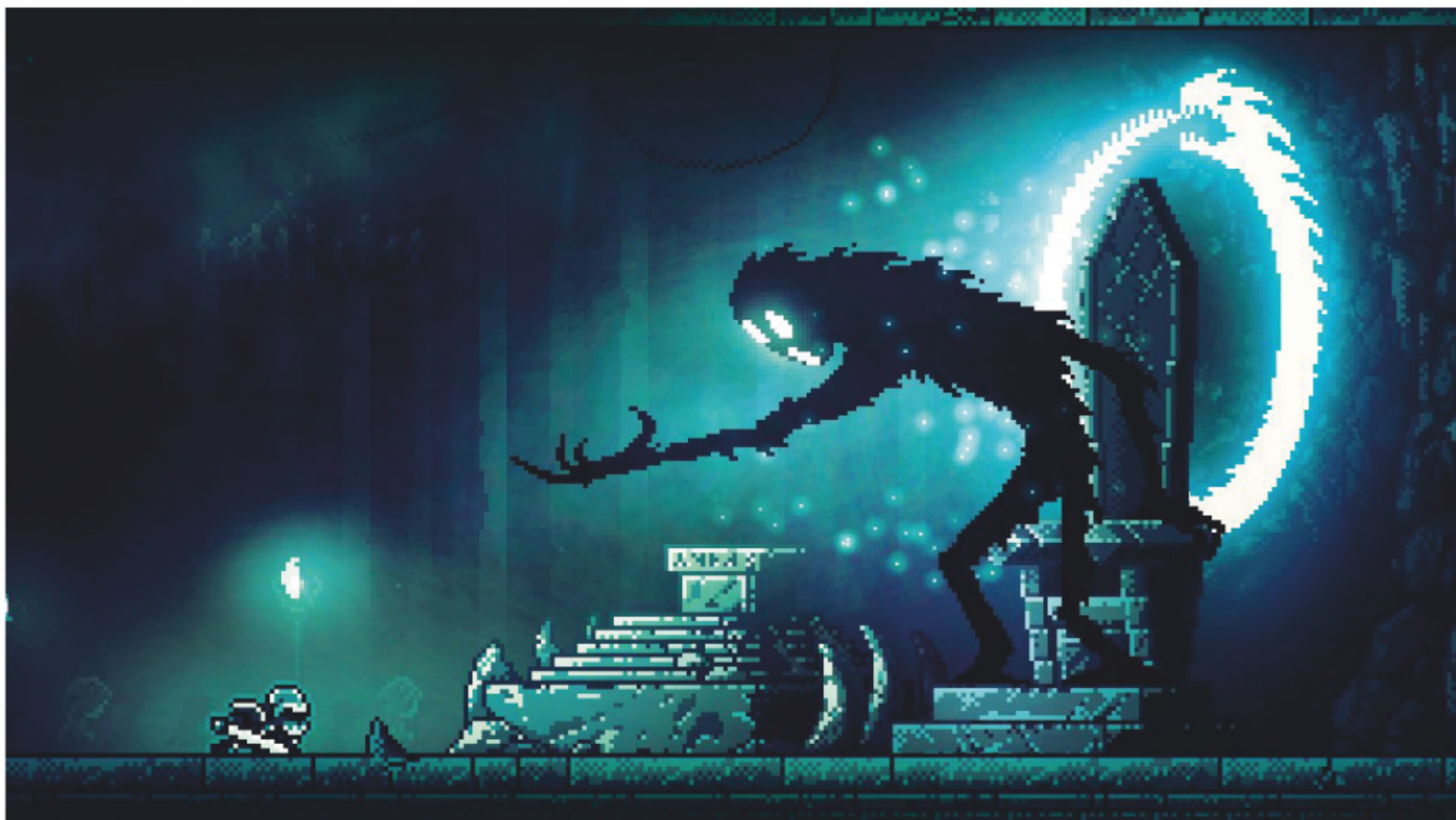
An intimidatingly polished horror platformer bursts from obscurity

**T** rue horror comes from your expectations being subverted; *Inmost* does so with terrifying finesse. It's no secret that 16bit art can be expressive, but we've not felt so haunted by a collection of pixels in a long time. A pool of black ooze on the floor seems innocuous enough. But as we approach, our monochromatic surroundings throbbing into painful new shades, the ooze gathers itself into shape, flips its death mask upside down – and lunges. The speed at which it moves is breathtaking. It hurls itself into corners and

claws across cobblestones in pursuit of our tiny hero, who we urge towards an exit with the taste of dread thick in our mouth.

It is staggering what Hidden Layer Games – a two-person dev team based in Lithuania whose oeuvre consists mainly of saccharine match-3 mobile games – has already achieved here. *Inmost* has a magnitude of presence: lavishly applied animation and lighting lends a pleasing weight to moving through and interacting with its strange worlds. It feels odd to describe a horror platformer as 'luxe' – but,

*Inmost's* art style takes inspiration from *Flashback*, *Limbo* and *To The Moon*







LEFT Currently, Testov tells us, *Inmost's* main character has about 500 unique frames of animation for 100 actions



TOP LEFT When animations don't offer clues, NPCs help out, or sparkles indicate objects you can interact with. We don't get stuck often. ABOVE This slower set-piece ends with an excellently done jump scare – the audio work is just as chilling as the visual flourishes

well, there it is. Candles on dungeon walls spit out tiny sparks that float and fall through the air; water drips from ceilings; shadow beings evaporate into the breeze at the press of a key. And not only is it gorgeous to look at, it's useful: wooden boards buckle under pressure to let you know that, yes, you should probably keep jumping and see what's underneath.

***Inmost* is a puzzle** platformer split between two mazelike worlds. Much of the early challenge in one section revolves around precise timing, jumps and invincible roll-dodges, as we avoid the grasping and lethal black substance clinging to the walls of the castle. But there are elements of *Metroidvania* here too, as we scour environments for the pickaxe we need to uncover new pathways. Some puzzles are simple: finding a key or a lever, perhaps, or picking up a wooden beam with which to prop up a fallen platform.

But our demo shows off a little of the creative range we'd like to see more of. At one point, we're stumped on how to backtrack through an area – before we realise we're only

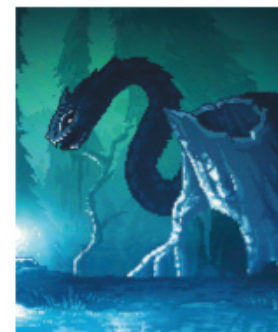
considering the single screen in front of us, and make a leap of faith towards the otherwise out-of-reach platform in the adjacent environment, the screen scrolling smoothly to show the successful landing. Later, a cart of arrows must be pushed from the screen above to fall to the one below, so that we can load a ballista and break down a wall.

But this is just one aspect of *Inmost*. The game follows three protagonists, their separate story strands braiding into each other along the way. In one scene, we play as a small girl, stacking stools to reach light switches and air vents until encountering a horrific figure illuminated by a lightning storm. In another, we step into the shoes of an elderly gentleman, collecting our hat and walking stick before hobbling down a spiral staircase while he recounts a chilling tale of a creature that feeds on pain. Curiously, it's not clear whether these three are the heroes of this tale: we've seen other sections in which the player controls a sword- and grapple-hook-wielding knight, and

## Water drips from ceilings; shadow beings evaporate into the breeze at the press of a key

even a glowing-eyed monster of some kind.

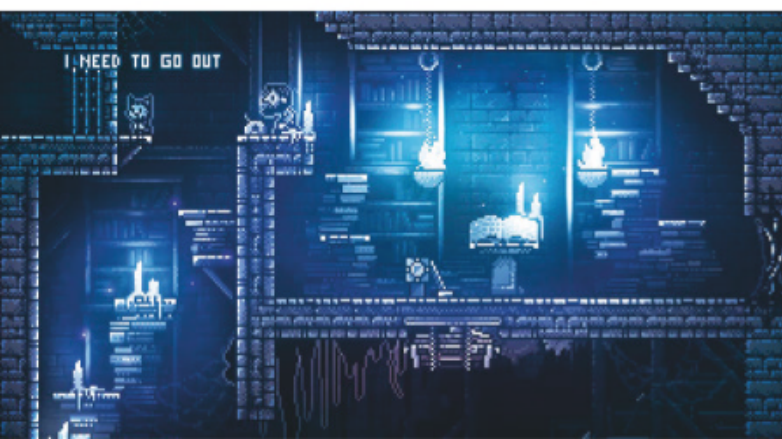
What is abundantly plain, however, is that *Inmost* is something special. Our sole worry before getting our hands on it was that the set-pieces in its website's gorgeous collection of animated GIFs would be largely non-interactive. But as we scramble to elude the clutches of our masked pursuer, our avatar backing away and stumbling as we plot our panicked route out of danger, we're soon assured that Hidden Layer's platformer will be dragging us along for the stomach-churning ride at every opportunity. It's both pure indie magic and quintessential horror: something extraordinary materialising, quite suddenly, from unknown origins.



## Sweet escape

Hidden Layer Games' previous output is completely unlike *Inmost*, being a collection of Flash games and some rather predatory-looking mobile titles. But it was shrewd business on the part of artist Alexey Testov and programmer Andriy Vinchkovskiy: following political tensions in their respective home countries of Ukraine and Russia, the two used their previous earnings to relocate to Lithuania and begin work on the game they wanted to make. The first demo won Best Indie Game at 2017's DevCamm conference and they netted a £23,000 prize to continue funding the project. Flash forward to 2019, and the game's appearance on Nintendo's recent indie showcase drew the attention of many industry luminaries. Those *Candy Crush* clones seem like a lifetime ago.

Hopefully puzzles will branch out from simple fetch quests such as this one. We do, however, find ourselves enjoying the optional collectible challenges





Developer Askiisoft  
Publisher Devolver Digital  
Format PC  
Origin US  
Release March



## KATANA ZERO

A stellar action platformer in which foresight is 20:20

**H**ere, the drugs really *do* work. *Katana Zero* casts you as a contract killer, a former soldier in a brutal war who, thanks to a military drug, is able to see the future. Its levels play out in opposite fashion to *Prince Of Persia: Sands Of Time*, which memorably justified its checkpoint system with the line, 'Wait... that's not how it happened.' Here, you play the game in theory, precognitively; kill all the enemies on screen and the protagonist mutters, 'Yes, that should work,' before your successful run plays back on a grainy black-and-white display.

It's a fine idea, and immensely satisfying to see your grisly wetwork played back in realtime, shorn of the sphincter-clenching tension that's par for the course in a game

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***Your moveset is slender – a roll, a jump, a slash – but you'll rarely want for anything else***

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where a single mistake means death. Combat is stylish enough in the hands, but is even more so when you're watching it back – you've cheated the odds, not only by way of the instant restart after a failure, but by the time-slowing ability you used to make it easier to pass through bullets with your invincible dodge, or to deflect them at the shooter with a well-timed sword swipe.

Your moveset is slender – a roll, a jump, a slash – but you'll rarely want for anything else, especially as there's such flexibility within it. Sword swipes can be angled upwards or diagonally, and can kill a target through the floor or ceiling; a well-timed slash can be used to extend a jump or shift momentum after you spring off a wall. Throwable items are helpfully, though sparingly, left around the place, and range from statues and knives to smoke bombs and flamethrowers. Enemies have clearly defined silhouettes and attack in predictable ways; the slugger will charge you down, the rifleman will ping you from afar.

The real source of variety is Askiisoft itself, which uses the purity of *Katana Zero*'s core concept as a springboard into some unexpected, and frequently wonderful, places. A hit on a big-time DJ has you stalking through a nightclub, dancing among pockets of ravers to evade the prowling guards' gaze. You'll fight off a helicopter while speeding down the highway on a motorbike. Your heart may sink when you're sent out on a stealth mission, but Askiisoft flips the script smartly. Elsewhere, there's a charming little love letter to the 16bit era, a hoary old cliché updated in pacy, thrillingly bloody fashion.

**It's an excellent** action game, then, but there's more to *Katana Zero* than pleasingly snappy controls, a stern challenge and rivers of claret. It also tells a surprisingly complex story, and affords you unexpected control over it. Entire plot threads will vanish if you're not in the mood – on a second playthrough we abandon a burgeoning friendship with a young next-door neighbour – and conversations can be cut brutally short. When an NPC starts speaking, it takes a few seconds for your dialogue options to appear, but prior to that you can interrupt them, often brusquely. That, in turn, affects their response to you, both at the time and as events play out later on.

And things really do take a turn. Early on there are hints at where your time-warping powers come from; your assassination contracts come from a therapist who shoots narcotics into your arm at the end of every session. But events quickly spiral, your time powers glitching out and used to have both player and protagonist question what is real, or merely being previewed.

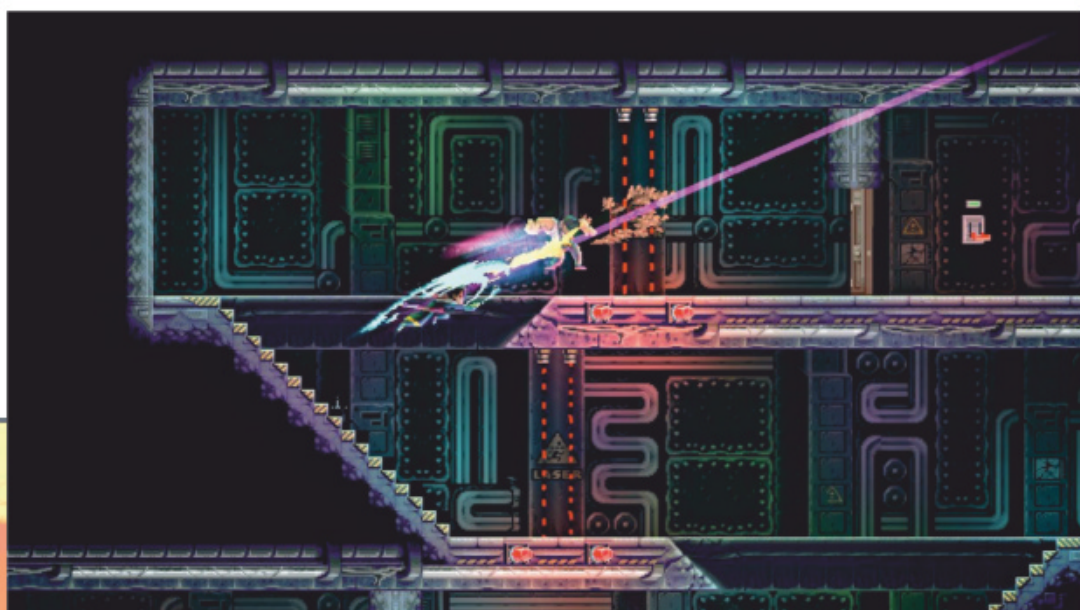
That's something we can relate to: it's not often we're given so complete a package this far in advance of release. There will be further polishing in the final weeks before launch, but *Katana Zero* is already in excellent shape. As we watch the credits on our preview build roll, an appropriate line comes to mind. Yes. That should work. ■



### Playing for time

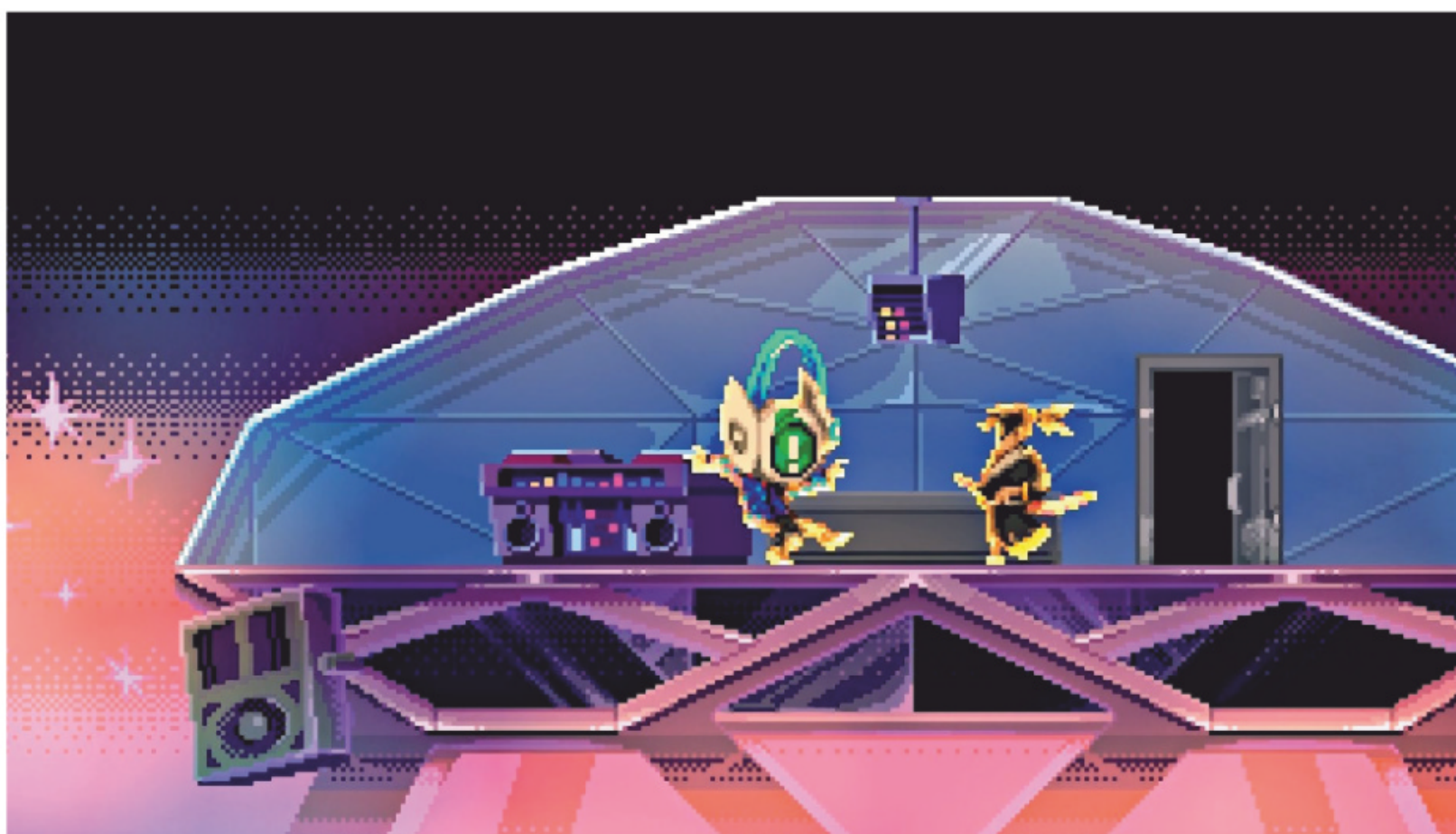
*Katana Zero* came to our attention via the annual charity speedrun marathon Awesome Games Done Quick: publisher Devolver Digital is a sponsor of the event, and it was a savvy choice of venue for the game. Fast-paced, action-packed, with instant restarts and a narratively justifiable dialogue skip, it's a speedrunner's wet dream even before you start to consider how level runs might be better optimised – and there's certainly plenty of that, with many levels having multiple routes, and enemy spawn placements changing depending on where you die. It may have only made the advertising hoardings at AGDQ, but *Katana Zero* looks set to become a fixture on the speedrun circuit itself before long.





TOP Most laser fields are narrow enough for you to dash through, though some can be turned off at wall switches and others must be avoided by manipulating scenery. ABOVE Boss battles are rare, and pose a stern challenge. Instant restarts lessen the pain of death

TOP The game has some of the best pixel animation around, and the nightclub scene is a high point.  
MAIN The motorway chase is a recipe for disaster, but your time-slowing power, and generous checkpoints, ensure it's a pleasure.  
RIGHT You're instructed not to talk to this DJ target. If you do, he hints at the real nature of your time powers







## ROUND-UP

### LEGACY

Developer/publisher 22Cans Format PC Origin UK Release TBA



In 2012, Peter Molyneux unveiled in these pages his new studio, 22Cans, and told us it would release 22 games. Seven years later Molyneux has unveiled its fifth project. *Legacy* harkens back to Molyneux's first game, the business sim *The Entrepreneur*, which with a sad sort of irony only sold two copies. This has much more meat on its bones, with the early biz-building turning into a far more involved game of industry. Fair enough – when the micro becomes big enough, it naturally turns macro. But we hope Molyneux practices what the game preaches: if he's really going to get 22 games out there, he wants to get his skates on.

### BALDUR'S GATE

Developer Beamdog Publisher Skybound Format TBA Origin Canada Release TBA



Yes, you read that right. Thanks to upstart *The Walking Dead* publisher Skybound and developer Beamdog, this classic CRPG – along with fellow Infinity Engine games *Planescape: Torment* and *Neverwinter Nights* – is finally landing on consoles in Enhanced Edition form with all previous expansions included. There's no news on specific platforms just yet; needless to say we're using all our mighty influence to get these beauties on Switch. (We'll send an email at some point.)

### GROUNDHOG DAY: LIKE FATHER LIKE SON

Developer Tequilaworks Publisher Sony Pictures Virtual Reality Format PSVR, Rift, Vive Origin Spain Release 2019



You got us, babe. The *Rime* dev showed its flair for VR stories in *The Invisible Hours*, so hopes are high for this, which casts you as Phil Connors Jr in an ever-looping Punxsutawney, and then tasks you with breaking the chain. You mean we put the headset on and we're Bill Murray's son? You got us, babe.

### ONE FINGER DEATH PUNCH 2

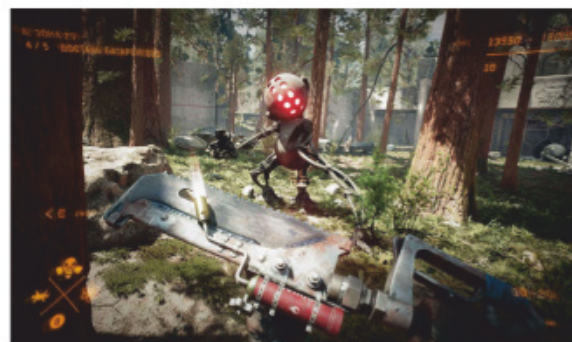
Developer/publisher Silver Dollar Games Format PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One Origin Canada Release April 15



Silver Dollar Games was once unstoppable, releasing games at light speed through Xbox Indie Games. Five years after its masterpiece, the two-button rhythmic brawler *One Finger Death Punch*, it's back with a sequel. It looks like more of the same, but you know what they say: if it ain't broke, punch it.

### ATOMIC HEART

Developer/publisher Mundfish Format PC Origin Russia Release TBA



This beautiful, and vividly realised, dystopian RPG by Russian developer Mundfish is apparently in deep trouble: reports tell of sweeping layoffs and a game that in no way reflects the majesty of one of the best announcement trailers we've seen. For once we truly hope Russia is peddling fake news.





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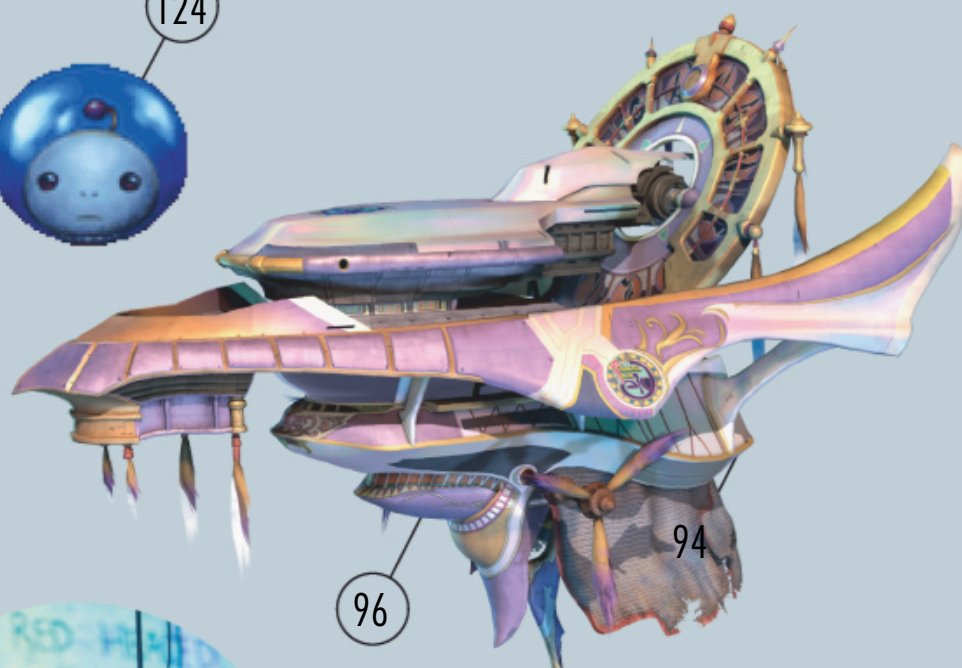
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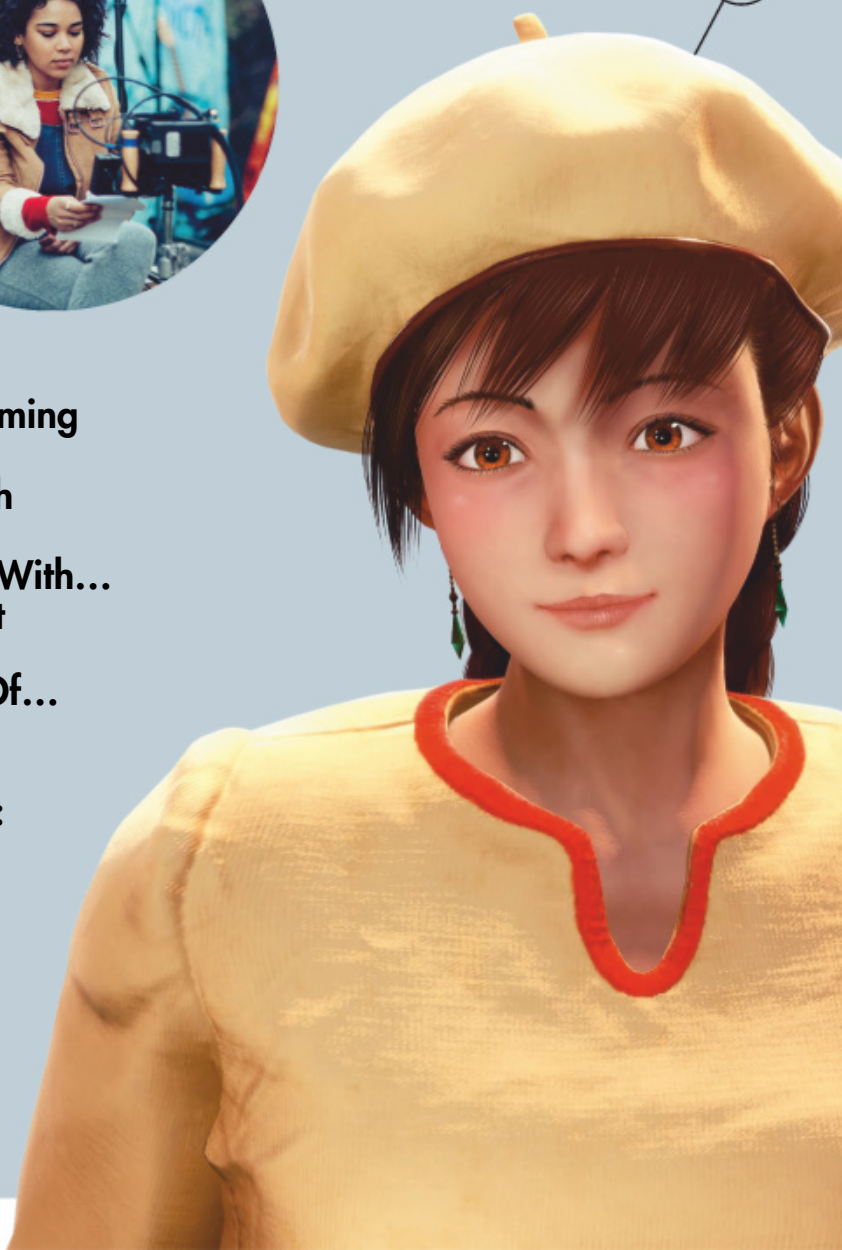
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# LONG TIMING COMING

After almost 20 years in wait, Ryo  
Hazuki continues his quest for revenge

BY ANDY KELLY







alk about an unlikely sequel. *Shenmue*, once the most expensive videogame ever made, died a quiet death as Sega halted production of the Dreamcast. But so beloved was **Yu Suzuki**'s idiosyncratic, melancholy martial arts series that, thanks to years of campaigning from fans and over \$7,000,000 of crowdfunding money, the story of Ryo Hazuki is finally to resume. *Shenmue III* continues the series' distinctive mix of life simulation, amateur detecting, fighting-game combat and atmospheric world building. Thanks to the almost two decades of advancements in technology and design that have occurred while Hazuki has been staring into mirrors on the sidelines, his return will also feature deeper systems rooted in roleplaying games, and a fascinating new dialogue system that promises to make character interaction more sophisticated.

Once again, our sullen teenage martial artist is searching for Lan Di, the man who brutally murdered his father in front of him. His journey has taken him from his quiet hometown of Yokosuka, Japan to the

appear and secrets of the village are gradually revealed as the story progresses. I feel the story is equally enjoyable for both fans of the series and newcomers alike.

"Ryo's father was killed for the mirror and Shenhua's father was kidnapped for it," he adds. "This is the story of how these two people with their shared culture and shared circumstances come together to work towards the same goal: to unveil the mysteries of the mirror and find Lan Di."

A far cry from the snowy suburbs of Yokosuka or the chaotic, bustling streets of Hong Kong, Bailu is a sleepy rural village nestled deep in the mountains of Guilin. This is where *Shenmue III* begins, as Hazuki looks for clues to Lan Di's whereabouts. And true to the original games, the people who inhabit the village have routines, homes and unique personalities. Learning the habits of the people around you was a big part of what made the first *Shenmue* so special, and while some of that was lost in the shift to a large city in the sequel, Bailu is a return to the more close-knit, parochial feel of Yokosuka.

## "I ONCE AGAIN WENT THROUGH ALL THE MATERIALS I'D GATHERED 20 YEARS AGO"

mountains of Guilin, China. But while his quest for vengeance has typically been a lonely one, in *Shenmue III* he's joined by a mysterious woman named Shenhua. Her presence is felt throughout the first two games, and he seems to share some kind of enigmatic spiritual connection with her—something that's lightly touched on in *Shenmue II*, but will be explored far more deeply in the third game.

"In the real world 18 years have passed, but in *Shenmue III* the story picks up immediately after the events of the previous game," says Yu Suzuki, creator of the *Shenmue* series and the writer/director of *Shenmue III*. "Ryo and Shenhua have arrived at her home village of Bailu, where they once again begin searching for clues to the identity and whereabouts of Lan Di, the person who killed Isao, Ryo's father. Locals who once knew Isao

*Shenmue* is known for its remarkable attention to detail, especially with regards to recreating the 1980s time period. And the same level of research has gone into creating the setting for *Shenmue III*. "I once again thoroughly went through all the materials I'd gathered 20 years ago, researched China in the 1980s, indigenous Chinese tribes, their customs, villages and the like," Suzuki tells us. "I also visited Fujian Province, and did some direct hands-on research on the local people there and their lifestyles." Suzuki studied photographs of Chinese people in the 1980s to make sure the faces and fashion sense of the game's many individual NPCs feel authentic to the period.

Hazuki being out of his element, a hopeless city boy, will play into the story in *Shenmue III* — particularly in his interactions with his new companion. "Shenhua was ▶








**Game** *Shenmue III*  
**Developer** Ys Net  
**Publisher** Deep Silver  
**Format** PC, PS4  
**Release** August 27



Hazuki is a skilled martial artist, but will need further training to defeat Guilin's best fighters. A new progression system will make developing his skills more interactive. We're hoping we'll find out more about the Phoenix Mirror and Dragon Mirror between scraps – they were among the many mysteries left hanging at the end of *Shenmue II*





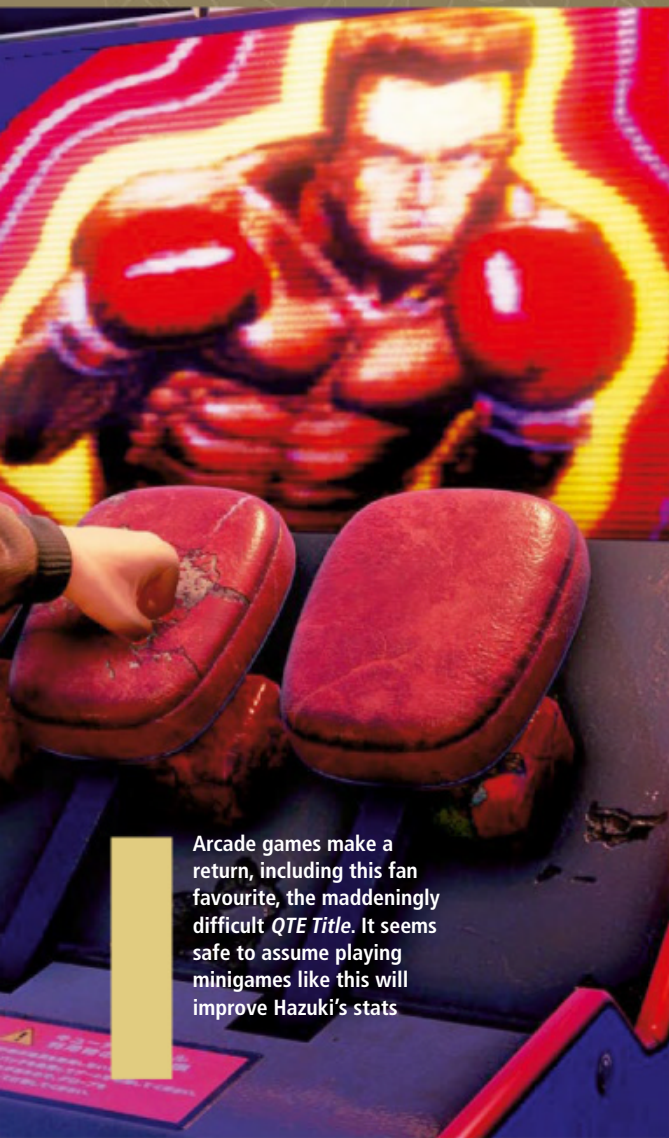
The rural beauty of the main location, Guilin, is a big change from the urban settings of the first two games

## INDEPENDENT SPIRIT

Curiously, despite *Shenmue* being one of its most beloved games, Sega is not involved in the development of *Shenmue III*. The game is being released by German-Austrian publisher Deep Silver, and Ys Net is a Tokyo-based independent studio. However, in an interview with Kotaku, Suzuki suggested getting the rights to make the sequel was easier than expected. "Sega felt safe giving me the licence to make the next one," he told the site. "They're the reason I was even able to make *Shenmue* in the first place." As to whether Sega will see any money from sales of *Shenmue III*? Suzuki won't reveal the particulars of the deal.







Arcade games make a return, including this fan favourite, the maddeningly difficult QTE Title. It seems safe to assume playing minigames like this will improve Hazuki's stats

## LONG TIME COMING

raised in the countryside, surrounded by nature and the freedom that provides, while Ryo is the exact opposite, having been raised in the city," Suzuki says. "I really hope that players will be able to enjoy the funny and interesting conversations and viewpoints rising from the differences in values and environment between the two characters."

Suzuki has described *Shenmue III* as "looking inward rather than outward", which suggests we may learn a little more about Hazuki, the stoic teen who seems permanently oblivious to how much danger he's in, and how much people care for him. His quest for revenge is, by any measure, incredibly foolish – something several characters have told him throughout the series. But hopefully we'll delve a little deeper into his character here, even if he will, by Suzuki's admission, at least start out as the man we know and love.

"Since only a month or two has passed since *Shenmue II*, there haven't been any drastic changes to Ryo's character," he explains. "But visiting this foreign country and interacting with the villagers of Bailu will contribute to his growth. With his pathos and distinctive personality, good old

anything. "Do I look like I'd know about that?" he says, gruffly. This is what Ys Net is calling the Affinity system, which will require you to get to know people, or make a name for yourself, to reveal key information.

It's a system that plays neatly into the fiction: Hazuki is a stranger in Bailu, after all, and an isolated village like this would likely be wary of outsiders. But the more time you spend in the village, and the more tasks you complete there, the warmer people will become. And if you talk to Su Zixiong with Shenhua in tow, he'll be much more open and friendly, realising that you know each other. In *Shenmue I* and *II*, people would gladly reveal their life story without needing much encouragement, but here you'll have to get to know someone before they tell you anything about themselves. It's an intriguing and innovative approach to NPC interaction, making the information-gathering side of the game – which will, once again, play an important role – a good deal richer.

The Affinity system will also extend to your ongoing relationship with Shenhua, which will develop as you spend time with her. "The more you speak with Shenhua, the closer your relationship grows, and the more

## " RYO, THE MOST OBLIVIOUS MAN IN THE WORLD, IS STILL THE SAME AS EVER "

Ryo, the most oblivious man in the world, is still the same as ever." And fans will be glad to know that the source of much of Hazuki's charming obliviousness, the voice actor Corey Marshall, will once again play him in the English dub. Marshall has become something of an ambassador for *Shenmue*, and his enthusiasm for the series and its dedicated fans is infectious – even if that doesn't quite come across in Hazuki's languid delivery. But we wouldn't have the character sounding any other way.

As he enters the village, Hazuki sees a group of children practicing tai chi, copying the moves of their master. He approaches the master, a man named Su Zixiong, and begins asking questions. But, illustrating one of the most intriguing new features in *Shenmue III*, he's unwilling to talk. Cold, even. Hazuki is trying to locate someone called Mr Yuan, but the master, Su Zixiong, is reticent to reveal

her attitude and expressions change," Suzuki tells us. "I hope to be able to express the small, subtle changes in everyday life and interactions." Over the course of the game, Shenhua will become friendlier and closer to Hazuki. As has been suggested several times in the series, the destiny they share is an important part of the storyline, and this will loom large in *Shenmue III*'s plot.

It's not all destiny and magic mirrors, though. Playing minigames and working menial jobs to earn money has always been part of *Shenmue*'s peculiar magic, and *Shenmue III* is no different. Hazuki will start with only a small amount of yuan, meaning he'll have to find ways to earn his keep in Guilin. In Bailu he meets Liu Fang, a shady-looking villager running a Lucky Hit stand – a ball-dropping gambling minigame with which fans of *Shenmue II* will be more than familiar. You can try and win some yuan ▶



LONG TIME COMING







NEEDLESS TO  
SAY OUR  
FINGERS ARE  
CROSSED FOR  
FORKLIFTS

here or, if the second game is anything to go by, it's possible Hazuki can man the stand himself, tempting passers-by to play a game. The specifics of what jobs you can apply for have yet to be revealed, and Suzuki's in no mood to elaborate. Needless to say our fingers are crossed for forklifts.

Fighting has always been another big part of *Shenmue*, and this time the combat system is bolstered by an RPG-inspired progression system. "A new battle engine has been created especially for *Shenmue III*," says Suzuki. "It's been designed so the player can repeatedly undergo training to increase their level, to become able to take down even super-tough opponents." And it seems this will be a lot deeper and more satisfying than standing in the Hazuki dojo, or a Dobuita parking lot, practising the same leg move over and over again.

Early in the game, Ryo is looking for a man with a scar on his face, named Xuan Shancun. He finds him running another gambling stand – this one involves throwing balls into coloured buckets to win prizes – and confronts him. The camera zooms in on his scar to make it clear this is the guy you're looking for, but he refuses to hand over the information Ryo needs – the Affinity system making its presence felt once again. This time the outcome is a lot more violent. Xuan challenges Ryo to a duel, and a fight sequence begins.

The combat in the original *Shenmue* games was rooted in another of Yu Suzuki's great Sega series, *Virtua Fighter*. Here it's much smoother, with cleaner transitions between moves, but that recognisable animation style is still very much present. Unfortunately for Hazuki, however, Xuan is a much better fighter. Yet despite his unsavoury appearance, he's also strangely sportsmanlike. He tells Hazuki to find a place called Martial Hall, where he can hone his combat skills, and then come back for another round. Training was always important in *Shenmue*, but how exactly you were improving was quite opaque. This time progression is much clearer, and a more intrinsic part of the experience.

Two main stats govern Hazuki's combat ability: Attack Power and Endurance. The latter is tied to a stamina bar on the HUD, which is affected by pretty much everything you do, from sprinting while exploring to performing moves in a fight. Stamina can be restored by eating food, which can be stockpiled in your inventory, and eating before doing something strenuous will become part of your routine in *Shenmue III*. ►



## LONG TIME COMING

Attack Power is self-explanatory, dictating how hard you hit. And both of these stats can be improved by visiting the Martial Hall and taking part in a variety of training minigames. You can also, for the first time, customise Hazuki's appearance, changing out of his leather jacket and into more appropriate training gear.

Training is all about timing, reactions, and dexterity. In the Horse Stance minigame, Hazuki strikes an uncomfortable-looking pose and must hold still by rhythmically tapping a button to keep him in line with a HUD marker. Fail to keep him even and he'll fall over, but hold fast and your Endurance stat will increase, boosting your total stamina. Both Attack power and Endurance contribute to a third stat, Kung Fu, which lets you learn more advanced moves.

Another training minigame is the One-Inch Punch, which Hazuki practices on a wooden training dummy. This is another

strengths of the first *Shenmue* was how every citizen of Yokosuka had a complex, often sad backstory, as well as relationships with other characters, and it's promising to see intricate world-building like this making its way into *Shenmue III*.

In the dojo you can spar, challenge other students to a battle and train technique-scroll moves. Ryo decides to spar with a student called Red Tiger, and during the fight the combinations for the moves he currently has equipped appear, letting you practise them in a semi-real fight situation. Timing your attacks correctly and blocking Red Tiger's moves will slowly increase your Endurance and Attack Power, and ultimately your Kung Fu. Sparring is a much more efficient, and quicker, way to boost your stats, but battling a real person is trickier than hammering away at a training dummy.

There are more thrilling, and dangerous, ways to train your combat skills. In Niaowu, a

## THE MORE PEOPLE YOU DEFEAT, THE TOUGHER YOUR OPPONENTS BECOME

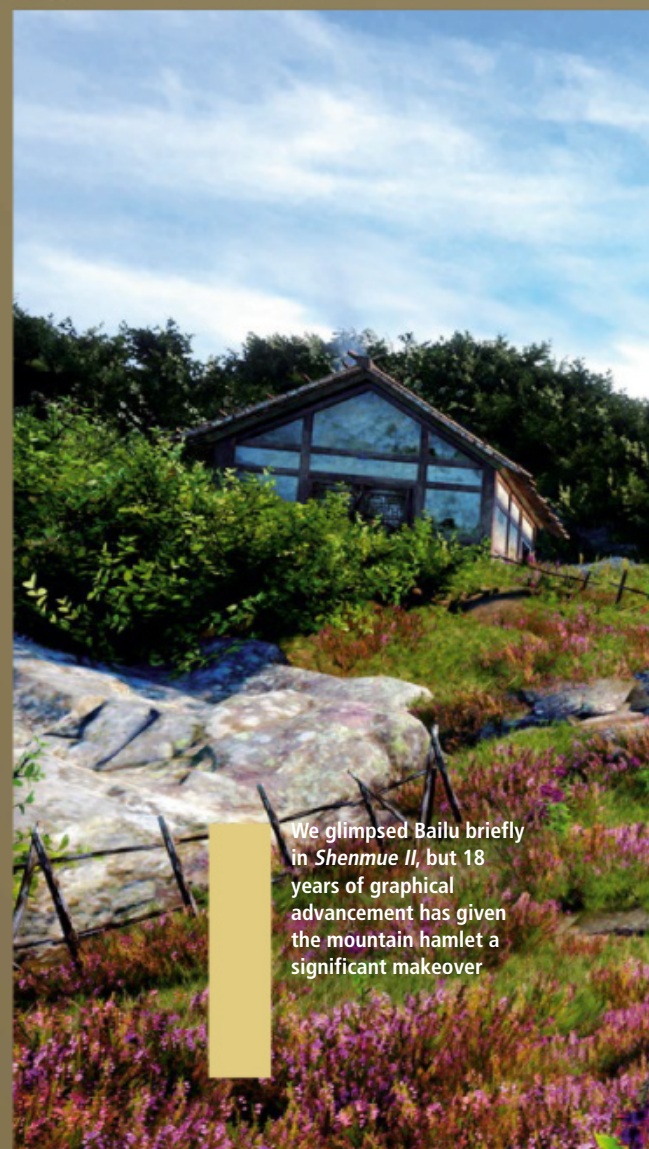
timing-based minigame, based on the famous move popularised by Bruce Lee, and will increase both Endurance and Attack Power. There's a satisfying, kinetic feel to these training games, particularly the echoing crack of the wood as Ryo strikes the dummy. As your stats increase, tasks become much more difficult in turn.

You can also train individual moves using technique scrolls, a returning feature from the first two games. All the scrolls from *Shenmue I* and *II* are available to learn, but there are some new ones too, amounting to around 100. Scrolls can be purchased from shops, traded with other characters or found while exploring the world, and the more versatile Hazuki's moveset is, the easier combat will be in the long run — especially when facing people who use exotic martial arts styles he hasn't encountered before.

Inside the Martial Hall, Hazuki meets a master called Huang Hu, who reveals that Xuan was one of his students. Apparently Xuan was a promising apprentice who travelled from far away to study in Bailu, but his passion left him and he started running gambling stands instead. One of the great

more built-up, urbanised settlement than Bailu, Ryo slips down a trash-strewn alleyway, past a golden statue of a fierce-looking Chinese deity, and sees a buzzing neon sign welcoming him to the Rose Garden. This is a slightly misleading name for a fighting ring located in the courtyard of an ornate temple. Here you can test your mettle against a number of increasingly skilled opponents who, unlike those training dummies, fight back.

After paying an entry fee of 1,000 yuan, a mustachioed ringmaster announces Hazuki's opponent: a severe-looking Muay Thai expert whose nickname is, ominously, The Knee Of Death. Although, in this instance, Hazuki's martial arts have been trained to the point where he takes him down with ease, the more people you defeat, the tougher your opponents become. And they also use a variety of different fighting styles that can only be effectively countered by mastering certain moves. For defeating the Knee Of Death, whose nickname loses its magic a little when he's lying there in a bruised heap, Hazuki receives 2,500 yuan, making this an especially lucrative side activity. ▶



We glimpsed Bailu briefly in *Shenmue II*, but 18 years of graphical advancement has given the mountain hamlet a significant makeover





Every eccentric character Hazuki meets will have their own routine. Over time you'll learn where Bailu's villagers hang out at certain times of the day



## FRIENDS REUNITED

Ys Net, the studio founded by series creator Yu Suzuki, in 2008, isn't flying entirely solo on *Shenmue III*. Another studio, Neilo, founded by Takeshi Hirai, lead programmer on the original game, is also involved. Hirai, an old friend of Suzuki, is the new game's creative director. Other members of the original *Shenmue* team returning for the third instalment include character designer Kenji Miyawaki, composer Ryuji Iuchi, scriptwriter Masahiro Yoshimoto, and Corey Marshall and Masaya Matsukaze as the English and Japanese voices of Ryo Hazuki. Ys Net has also hired architect Manabu Takimoto, who helped design the buildings in *Shenmue I* and *II*, so you can expect the same level of authenticity as before.



Other notable Rose Garden opponents include Chris Bellinger, the so-called ‘Mach Fist’, who the ringmaster dramatically claims has “sent countless fighters to surgery with his boxing-tempered fists of steel.” And, at a certain level, Ryo will have to fight multiple opponents at once. For players looking to dive into, and master, the intricacies of *Shenmue III*’s combat system, this will be a popular way to pass the time. Anyone who battled through the second game’s tough Kowloon street fights will feel right at home, although the Rose Garden is, for those who prefer to avoid combat, entirely optional.

As for *Shenmue*’s, erm, ‘unique’ controls, Suzuki is keen to retain the feel of the original games, but with some degree of modernisation. “It basically carries over the control scheme from *Shenmue II*, but analogue-stick camera operation, as often seen in modern games, is supported,” he says. “Also, the inventory can now be used in a variety of ways, so we have a new interface. But we haven’t looked to other titles for reference.” Ryo’s inventory is something you’ll delve into regularly, buying and selling items, and picking up hidden objects that can be located by looking around the world using the firstperson camera. And, yes, collectible capsule toys are making a comeback.

It’s heartening to hear that Suzuki wants to make sure *Shenmue III* still feels like a *Shenmue* game, and he seems to be resisting the urge to fall in line with other open-world games – a genre that has surged in popularity enormously since the Dreamcast days. “I believe fans who have been waiting patiently for this game will enjoy the *Shenmue*-specific vibe and world-feel, which is different from any game out there,” he says. “I decided to go all-in with making the world-building distinctive. There are a lot of great open-world games out there, but I don’t believe many, if any, are quite like *Shenmue*.”

It’s incredible, really, that *Shenmue III* exists at all. But the sheer strength of its cult following, and the enduring passion of its fanbase, has been enough to bring it back from the dead almost two decades later. “Everything is thanks to the power of the fans who continued to offer their support for such a long time,” says Suzuki. “Every year I get sent letters and such from people looking forward to *Shenmue III*, and people saying they don’t care if it takes the form of a manga or novel or whatever. They just want to know what happens next in the story. This combined with the Kickstarter eventually blossomed into something we never imagined when we started out on this project.” ■



Niaowu is much larger than Bailu. Here you'll find the Rose Garden, a fight club where Hazuki can earn money and test his skills against real opponents





The first two games had relatively modern settings; *Shenmue III*'s is much more steeped in the religion and ancient culture of China



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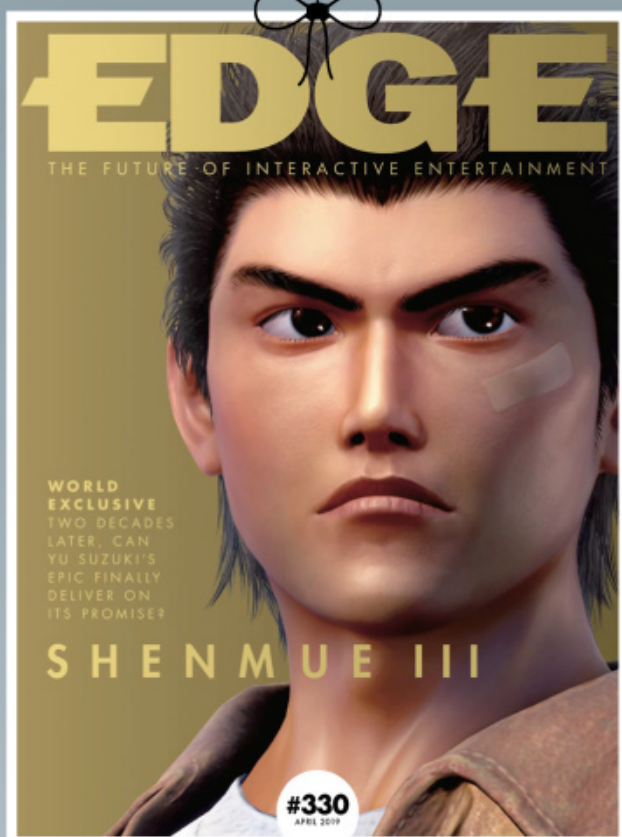
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# ORAIN OF TRUTH

The way we consume stories has changed – now, the process of telling them must follow suit. With his new game, *Her Story*'s creator is leading a revolution

BY JEN SIMPKINS

Sam Barlow is honest to a fault. Talking with him about his work, in fact, is eerily like playing one of his games. We watch him on our screen, speaking into his webcam: he recounts the design pillars he set out for *Her Story*, then rewinds to his time on *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* and the cancelled *Legacy Of Kain*, before free-associating rapidly between *Basic Instinct* and Hitchcock and social media and *Breath Of The Wild* and a 107-minute art film of David Beckham sleeping – and his new game, *Telling Lies*. It is exhausting but exhilarating to watch his mind work to explain itself. Wide-ranging, non-linear, full of seemingly disparate parts that only make sense when taken together, his story – of how he accidentally placed himself at the front of a new era of interactive film games, the evolution of his work and what he hopes it could contribute to the future of videogame storytelling – is nothing less than perfectly authentic.

Naturally, then, it starts with Barlow's admission that he had absolutely no idea what he was getting himself into with *Her Story*. His breakout hit was a detective game that tasked its player with searching a database of interview footage for audiovisual and linguistic clues, and shuffling information in their head in order to solve a murder. It is all shot with real footage of a human actor – otherwise known as a full-motion videogame. But fresh out of the triple-A space, he didn't begin his first independent project with the intention of redefining a niche and much-derided genre. He just wanted to make a good detective game. "I pitched this so many times to publishers, and they'd always said no," he says. "And I felt strongly that the evidence pointed to this being a successful space in every other medium." He'd enjoyed Infocom's detective games, and the *Phoenix Wright* series: "I love the fact that *Phoenix Wright* allowed you sometimes to feel like you had made a deduction, or thought outside the box, like maybe one in ten times." And he had spent enough time acquiescing to publishers' demands. Konami, for example, had insisted on a "modern innovation" in *Silent Hill: Origins*, whereas Barlow and team simply wanted to fix the mess ►



Barlow's experiments with interactive fiction began even before *Her Story*. His artistic trajectory owes much to *Aisle*, his Twine game where you uncover a relationship's details by searching terms in a non-linear fashion





they had inherited into something resembling a traditional *Silent Hill* game. ("Probably the greatest achievement of my life was that team turning that into a mediocre game from what we started with," he jokes.)

Six months followed in which he set out the four design pillars of *Her Story* that he hoped would lead to "a structure or gimmick, in the best sense of the word gimmick – that's the thing that gives me the confidence to get excited about it." It would be a game about subtext, the kind of story that trusted a player's intelligence in a way that scared most triple-A publishers; it would be a game that had no 3D exploration, the immersive quality of which Barlow believed was "a prop we all leant on". The game would also respect the player's imagination, its ability to fill in the blanks and thus make players feel more involved in a story. "And then the other one was that the player is not the protagonist, which was actually a Post-It note I had – spoilers! – when we made *Shattered Memories*. I really wanted to explore this assumption that this blank-slate character is you and allows you to express yourself. Often you are the least interesting character."

Full-motion video was not a conscious part of the plan; Barlow's research led him to using real footage. He pored over the details of interrogation techniques, academic studies into approaches to homicide investigations, and

because most of the early takes on *Her Story* were like, 'Hey, it's an FMV game but it's not crap'," he laughs. "Which is, I guess, better than going up against a hundred other really good pixel Roguelikes. But after that, I had to quickly go away and fill myself with knowledge about the genre so I had something interesting to say." It's almost too perfect: staunchly non-linear storyteller Barlow, having already created perhaps the most sophisticated FMV game ever, would now have to go back and learn his history.

**Barlow was stunned** by the genre's propensity to embrace the kinds of styles, characters and stories that games would usually steer clear of: legal dramas, erotic thrillers, bizarre horror. "There was definitely something cool about seeing that, at that point in history, bringing video in had brought in characters who were more like characters you'd see in other stories – partly through bringing in different creatives, and partly through just saying 'We can now have human beings on screen'. They don't have space helmets or ninja masks covering their mouths, they don't have to constantly be fighting so we don't have to justify that they're a warrior of some sort. It was cool seeing that that had already kind of happened, and we just hadn't necessarily worked it out."

For Barlow, the most successful FMV games were the

## OFF THE CHARTS

Barlow wants to discourage completionist attitudes in *Telling Lies*. "With *Her Story*, I was surprised by how many people got 100 per cent, which was maybe my bad because there was a chart that allowed you to see it. So in this one, we don't have that. And some clips are deliberately long, and there are these periods where nothing's really happening." The idea is to encourage players to slow down and take in the actors' subtle behavioural cues. Hyperlinked words in subtitles, however, will allow players to clip-hop at speed if they'd like.

"IF YOU'D ASKED ME 'WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF VIDEOGAMES?' I'D HAVE SAID THIS. IT'S YOU, IT'S FULLY SIMULATED, AND EMERGENT"

began watching YouTube footage of real interrogations. "I spent a whole week just watching all of the interviews with Jodi Arias, where they left the cameras rolling and she would be left in the room on her own and would start doing interesting things," he says. "I enjoyed this combination of how voyeuristic it was, how intimate it was; the fact that you were essentially sat listening to someone tell you their life story up until this point." He'd enjoyed working with actors to tell a story on past projects, too. "But I wasn't going to have like, \$2 million of mocap budget. So I was like, 'Ugh, how do I do this?' And I didn't want to make a thirdperson exploration game with diaries. I didn't want to come up with some clever art style that meant I could get away with the fact that I didn't have people. So when this idea popped into my head, I was like, 'Oh, this is great, because I get to work with actors and suddenly I get the world's best hair physics'." Suddenly, he was making an FMV game.

Not that he'd noticed. "In my head I was making this very weird, specific thing that appealed to me. The fact I was using video, it really came out of that process of me going, this makes complete sense. I've looked at all this police footage." It was only when he showed the finished game at a trade show shortly before release that a journalist pointed out the generic elephant in the room. "They were like, 'What made you want to tackle the FMV genre?' And I was like 'Oh, I guess this is...' And it became a good thing

ones that acknowledged that the player was watching video. He admired *Voyeur*, in which you surveil a politician from an apartment building across the street because it "was kind of Rear Window-y, but it was very cheesy"; *Night Trap* less so, with its health bar and game overs. "You get into the repetition being a problem – it stops being interesting. And that was one of the big advantages of the idea of *Her Story*, that the repetition was built in as a fun part of it. If you were watching clips and the context had changed, that was interesting." Erotic thriller *Tender Loving Care*, meanwhile, had a surprising amount in common with Barlow's past work, starring John Hurt as a psychiatrist helping a couple deal with the loss of their child – even offering the player multiple-choice therapy questions.

This was the kind of experimental narrative space into which Barlow had unknowingly dipped a toe with *Shattered Memories* – which, incidentally, was intended as a kind of homage to immersive sims such as *System Shock*, *Thief* and *Deus Ex*. "There was a point where if you'd asked me, 'What is the future of videogames?', I'd have said *this*," Barlow says. "It's you, and it's fully simulated, and emergent." The aim with *Shattered Memories* was to "take the artifice out", forgoing menu screens in favour of interactions via the phone and eschewing traditional controls for the intuitive motions of the Wiimote. Even the subtle machinations at work in the background of the ►





game – its analysis of where a player would point their camera view, their answers to a psychiatrist's questions or their interactions with the world, and warping the game to reflect them – were instrumental in creating a horror story that developed a kind of relationship with the player, one that felt uncannily real.

This kind of raw, honest relationship between a player and an interactive narrative is valuable to Barlow's preferred brand of storytelling, something he's been chasing throughout his career. But nowhere was the means of building one more simple and obvious than with *Her Story's* FMV component and its reception. "The thing that was exciting was seeing how much it broadens the audience," Barlow says. "The game got coverage in publications that wouldn't normally talk about games – we'd get like, double-page spreads in French newspapers. And I realised a lot of that was partly the genre – like, people understood what the story was. They would turn the page and you'd have a big picture of Viva [Seifert] in a police interview room, and they would get what they were looking at. Whereas you can take something that they might be interested in, like, *Gone Home*, and what are you going to put as that visual? It's going to be a CGI house, right? This sort of bypassed that."

The power of video to reach a new audience for games, to help bridge the communication gap that has widened

are talking to each other on a camera, which gives you that kind of Shakespeare thing of like, people rushing on stage: 'Oh, my God, the battle over there is intense, dude!' You're seeing these little snapshots through these people's lives and relationships, and then filling in the blanks."

For Barlow, it's essential to put the player into that experience mechanically, too. He found himself surprised by just how intimate players had found the experience of entering search terms in *Her Story*, and the non-linear progression of a kind of conversation with the main character. "People felt like, by thinking of things, searching them and pulling up clips, they were almost having a more real conversation than a fake videogame conversation." *Telling Lies* aims to preserve this feeling, although from a different, perhaps more voyeuristic perspective. "When you search for a word, you will get dropped into a much longer video clip at the point where the word is spoken," Barlow explains. "So at the very start, there is a prompt where the word 'love' is suggested as a search term. And a bunch of clips come up, and you're dropped into the very end of a conversation in which someone says, 'Love you', and then hangs up. And now you can scrub backwards." The analogue scrubbing is a crucial part of the experience of *Telling Lies*, allowing players to seek forward and backward with degrees of speed and control. "It's very tactile. So you

"YOU'RE SEEING LITTLE SNAPSHOTS THROUGH  
THESE PEOPLE'S LIVES AND RELATIONSHIPS,  
AND THEN FILLING IN THE BLANKS"

between interactive and non-interactive media, is just one of the reasons why Barlow has felt compelled to continue working in this space for his new game, *Telling Lies*. For him, it's about creating a more meaningful link between player and medium – something which video is uniquely placed to do. "The reason why it doesn't feel like I'm just making a sequel is that I did the thing I wanted to do [in *Her Story*], which was to take all of the fidelity of exploration you would get in a normal videogame, and apply that to the story – but in some way, apply it to the video itself," Barlow says. "In *Telling Lies*, the big difference is the relationship you have with the video."

Barlow has been describing his new game as a political thriller: in truth, it's more intimate than the label might suggest, a story about online relationships, personal secrets and modern communication. And again, the core premise of the story suits Barlow's database-searching mechanic and real video footage: you're combing through an NSA-style organisation's collection of remotely captured digital conversations, including webcam footage and Skype calls, between four main characters. "It's very much a story that's interested in, what does that do to our relationships?" Barlow says. "And it's a premise which really leans into this idea of empowering the imagination, because I don't contrive reasons to have these people speak on camera. The only bits of the story you see are the bits where people

have entire scenes and you're immediately inferring context – there's a mood at the point where you're dropped into the scene – and it might be that you now scrub and actually watch the scene backwards, see the subtitles flash up." Brit Perv film director Nicolas Roeg was a key inspiration for Barlow as he began to feel out the intricacies of his new game: he recalls an anecdote of Roeg being transfixed watching video footage playing backwards, and Roeg's referencing of it in a scene of a buffalo coming back to life through rewind film in *Walkabout*. "All of Roeg's best movies are full of this very free-associative combination of images and timelines – the sex scene in *Don't Look Now* jumps between them getting dressed after they've had sex, and then they go to dinner with the actual lovemaking. And that was interesting. Like, how do I use film to communicate something about how we experience and remember things? And that's a big part, for me, of *Telling Lies*."

**The nonlinearity with** which the game's series of relationships unfolds under the guidance of the player is a route into a more intriguing, and hopefully realistic, narrative. "If you try and recall a past relationship, you're not remembering it as a fully linear story, right? You're remembering the painful breakup moment. But you're also remembering the happy time you sailed in a gondola in Venice, and it's all part of the same experience, and you ►





*Telling Lies* boasts a glittering cast, including *Halt And Catch Fire*'s Kerry Bishé (pictured), Logan Marshall-Green of *The Invitation* fame, and *X-Men: Apocalypse* star Alexandra Shipp






Barlow: "What surprised me when I started doing this on a bigger scale was, I went in very humble and ready to lean on the experts. But because everything I was doing was different, I realised I was still the person that knew the most"







have this kind of *whole* take on it. You have these moments that are very different and disparate, and they all exist as part of that." And with multiple perspectives comes more room for the kind of interpretative, beyond-game mechanical player interactions: filling blanks in one's head, making leaps of logic, scribbling notes. "In *Telling Lies*, oftentimes, you're seeing a conversation between multiple people. And at any given point, you can only see one side of the conversation. So you are inferring the gaps – you get to just watch the wife's face while she's listening to what the husband is saying. And now all those rhetorical bits of speech that clue you into what someone has just said are firing your imagination. So you get these different POVs on things, and you have all the fun of having to figure out who are they talking to, inferring what they're talking about, and how it relates to the larger story."

Barlow's own view as to the future of videogames, then, has evolved. Once, the 3D spaces of immersive sims seemed to him the best arena in which to set a story. Now, it's the liminal spaces of narrative that Barlow wishes to explore. "Without bigging up this game too much," he laughs, "the only game I played whilst developing it where I'm like, 'Oh, they get it; this is what I'm trying to do' was *Breath Of The Wild*." Barlow was not a fan of open-world games before the latest *Zelda*: "Open-world games are, I think, the biggest exploiter of the enjoyment of screwing around in a 3D world. But I really feel like *Zelda*, just in how generous it is with players but also it isn't... It's so much more about rewarding your curiosity. It understands that you're not just wandering around in a big sandbox, you're kind of enjoying landscape." A world composed of hills to crest, corpses to explore, paths to walk – the atmosphere of anticipation and possibility was what Barlow was interested in. "In *Zelda* there's always more places I want to go to than I have been," he says. "But I think the fundamental thing was that the journey – this is the cliché – is actually as much fun or more fun than the destination."

This was what Barlow would focus on, above all else. "And it came from making *Her Story* as well, because the act of making a big ambitious video project, there's a POV you have on it – you're editing, and you're surrounded by all this footage, jumping around it. You're really enjoying, in a very fine grain, the pleasure of filmed performance and looking at video in a way that you can't when you're watching a finished movie going past at 24 frames per second. That's an experience I want to communicate – to put an audience in that same position where they have this relationship to the text." And a large part of that – in the same way as *Breath Of The Wild* might have you walk for five minutes, or wait for the rain to pass – is about space, and time. Boredom, even. "And that is a texture that doesn't exist generally in movies at all," Barlow says. He was struck by Sam Taylor-Johnson's 107-minute art film of David Beckham asleep in a Madrid hotel room. "I mean, it's David Beckham, forget that it's David Beckham. But here is this man sleeping, and so *nothing* is happening. But at the same time, to be there watching him is a really weird thing. It forces you to pay more attention to what's happening because nothing's happening. And the whole texture of that was fascinating." As was *24 Hour Psycho*, Hitchcock's movie slowed to the exact length of a day: ►

## WAR STORY

Barlow continued working with video footage with #WarGames, a season of an interactive TV show about a young clan of modern-day hackers. "It was my attempt to say, what does a Choose Your Own Adventure look like if you don't have choices, if it's all kind of behind the scenes?" But it struggled to find an audience upon release. "It was pitched as a free interactive show. And then it became a sponsored piece – initially sponsored by Walmart, which was kind of an interesting mix with subject matter there. I don't think it was necessarily put in front of the audience it was written for. But it was an interesting experiment."





"People would bring sleeping bags and sit and watch. It forced you to absorb it in a way that was very different."

**This unabashed air** of anti-cinema is something which permeates *Telling Lies*, and that Barlow hopes will work in a similar way to *Breath Of The Wild*, with players able to set their own pace: letting things unspool naturally, or scrubbing through efficiently, clicking and chasing words and clues at the speed at which their brain is whirring. With eight times as much footage as *Her Story*, there'll certainly be enough to do so. "In terms of the 'difficult second album' thing, I'm sure there are some people that will go 'Her Story was very pure and focused – this is bigger...' But Roeg and Ken Russell, they made movies that weren't always perfect: they were often a bit messy, but full of colour, life and texture."

*Her Story*, he says, wrestled with the storytelling methods of *BioShock* and *Silent Hill*; *Telling Lies* "definitely feels like pushing in a more open world-y direction, in terms of the pacing, the amount of time you spend in the game and the amount of content." The 'completion chart' of clips is gone, Barlow keen to encourage players not to be obsessive in the way that one might comb every road looking for inevitable items in, say, an open-world RPG. "I really wanted to be like, if you have ten things you're thinking of jumping to next, go do those! Which, again, is something that I felt with *Zelda*. I just let myself be led by my nose."

"THE REASON THAT HER STORY'S FORMAT IS STILL SO INTERESTING IS THAT IT'S HOW WE EXTRACT INFORMATION FROM THE WORLD"

It's a level of trust that the player is capable of directing a narrative, essentially, that imbues the best modern games with something more vital. And creating a kind of familiarity – through video footage, through communication through technology, through the mechanical intrigue of free-association – could be a way of imparting it. Indeed, Barlow believes it may even be the simpler choice, now that our own relationship with stories has changed. "I think the idea of telling a story by curating 90 minutes and leading you beat by beat through it is *harder* to do," he says. "I think the reason that *Her Story*'s format is still so interesting to me is that it's how we extract information from the world. I'll have 20 tabs open on the internet, I'll see something trending on Twitter, and then go and read three or four articles about it. I'll read tweets – I can't even avoid reading contrary tweets now because they're forced into my timeline, so I have to be aware that some people think this stupid thing. Watching my kids watching people make YouTube videos about someone else streaming a videogame and it's not even about the game. There are so many layers and everything is so nonlinear, free-associative and so subjective. We could all see the same tweet about something that's happened, and based on where we click and how we proceed, and even our baked-in algorithm bullshit, get to a completely different endpoint, or

perspective. And so it feels interesting to take a story and tell it in a format that is aware of how we see things now."

And in Barlow's estimation, real video footage has morphed from gimmicky, cheesy technological experiment to one of the most valuable tools when telling stories in today's climate. "It feels like we're in this interesting transitional space where all of the big entertainment companies know that this thing is going to happen," he says. "They're all terrified that they're losing eyeballs to social media, and *Fortnite*, and stuff that is not watching stories. So they're all like, 'Hey, we want to do something like this.' But I don't know what it is. No one knows what it is yet." He is sceptical of the idea of honing his own forays into the interactive video space into something that's a defined format or genre, "but the fact that we get so much entertainment through our devices feels like there's a whole world of possibilities there, of which 'choose your own adventure' stuff is one reasonably narrow avenue." He voices a worry that Black Mirror's interactive Netflix film *Bandersnatch* might become too definitive of this burgeoning genre; an admiration for Quibi, a forthcoming mobile-first service that breaks down long-form storytelling into tiny chunks. "You can sit and play it for two or three hours in a way that feels more immersive than if you had sat and watched a two-hour movie or episode of TV whilst checking your social media. So yeah, everyone's head is in

the same space, and we're just trying to figure it out."

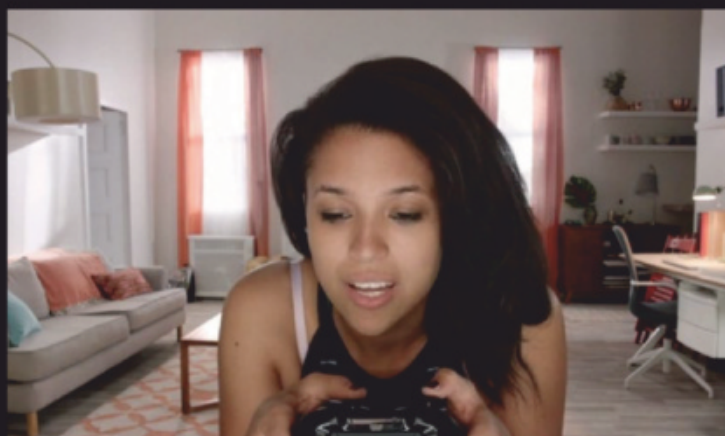
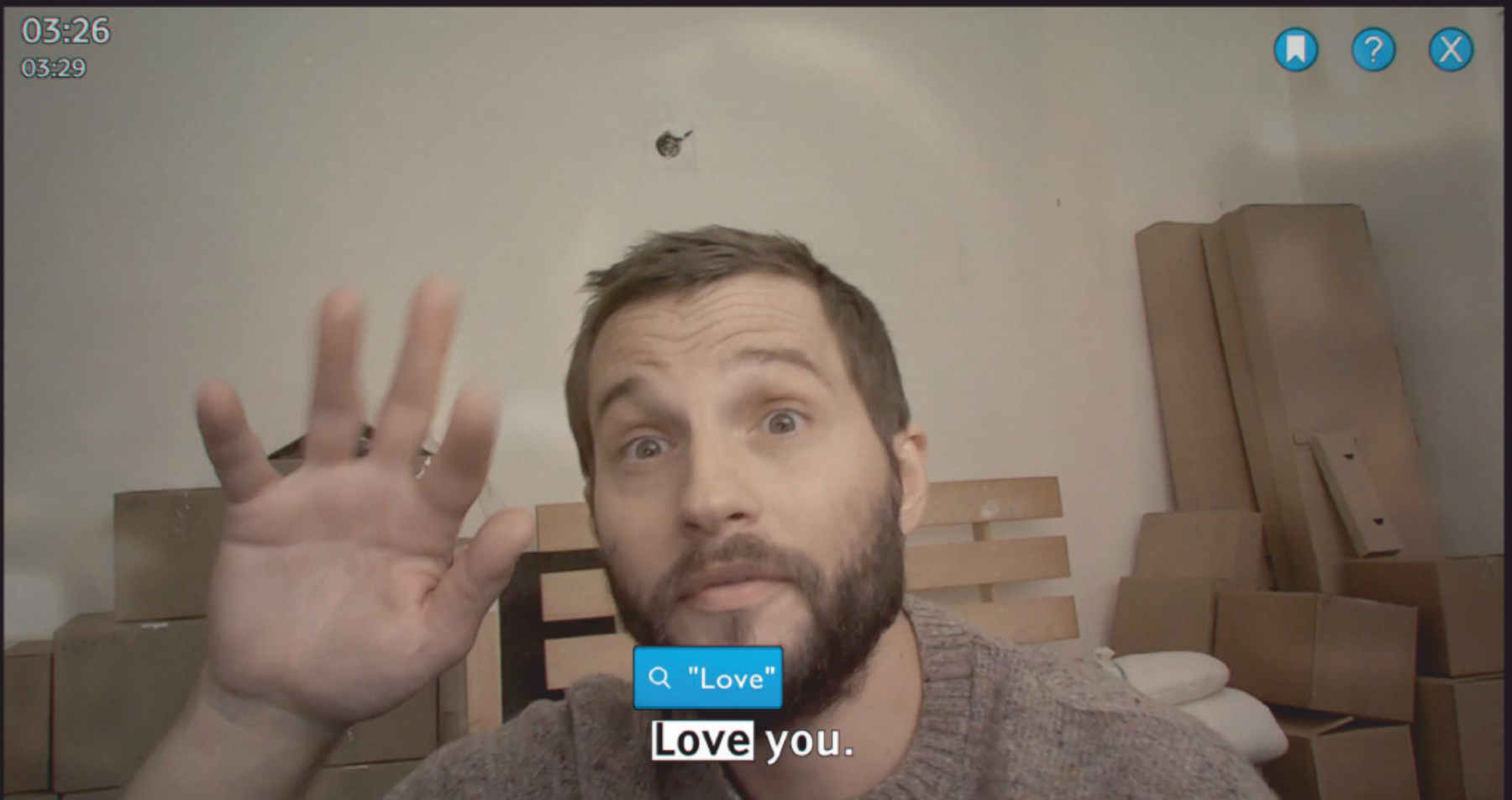
The ability for live action to communicate emotion and character, he feels, "is a gift. It allows you to put people in those worlds, have them feel for these characters. And I think there's so much that hasn't been done – the fact that we now live in a streaming world, with the ability to just capture and edit video. It feels like that is a bar that is lowered to doing interesting things in this space. You look at what Emily Short's doing, you look at what Inkle's doing, at the way dialogue works in *Oxenfree* – these far more nuanced, organic experiences that are 20 years on from the classic 'choose your own adventure', turn-to-page-23 stuff. I would love to see those people and that kind of thinking move over into this world and start playing with live action, *rather* than the live-action world having to catch up on those 20 years."

Indeed, if anything, Barlow is concerned that *Telling Lies*, and its purposefully bare-faced depiction through full motion video of how modern communication works, might hew too closely to the contemporary bone. "The hardest thing has probably been the subject matter of this game, which has become very relevant over the last few years," he says. "And just making sure that – because everything changes so quickly – your story is truthful enough. That it has enough authenticity in it." ■





Early screenshots from *Telling Lies* show some of the functionality included in clips this time around, including scrubbing and hyperlink-style subtitles. The computer-style interface from *Her Story* returns, too, in more contemporary and detailed form



Barlow's success with *Her Story* (far left) led to "some horrendous meetings with business people saying, 'We can license the template – we have access to all these influencers who would love to tell their stories.' And I'm like, 'Ehh...'"







A photograph of a room with a wooden bookshelf filled with books, games, and trophies. A large lamp with a pleated shade is on the right. A black tufted leather chair is in the foreground. A white diamond shape is overlaid in the center, containing text.

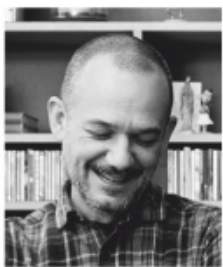
AN AUDIENCE WITH...

# DAVID POLFELDT

The head of Ubisoft Massive on  
keeping players in the loop and  
your eyes on the prize

BY NATHAN BROWN





# CV

David Polfeldt began his career as an illustrator, after gaining a masters' degree in graphic design from renowned Swedish art school Konstfack. After a spell working for marketing and communications agencies, he joined Massive Entertainment, which was then owned by Vivendi, as VP and director of marketing in 2005. Three years later he was appointed managing director when Ubisoft acquired the studio, and in the years since has steered the studio through a period of rapid growth. When he took over, Massive's headcount was around 40. These days it has 700 staff across two cities, and is in the process of renovating an entire city block for its new HQ.

**T**his has been a defining generation for Massive Entertainment. The studio in Malmö, Sweden spent the PS3 and 360 era in support roles for its new parent company Ubisoft, helping out on the *Assassin's Creed* and *Far Cry* series. Yet it is now one of the jewels in the publisher's crown, with *Tom Clancy's The Division* setting records for sales and player engagement, a sequel on the way and a game based on the forthcoming *Avatar* film. At the centre of it all has been David Polfeldt, the studio MD who has guided the studio through its most successful, yet also most perilous, period. Here, he reflects on how to maintain a culture when your studio doubles in size, how to react when things don't go to plan – and the surprising parallels between game development and professional sport.

**You last featured in *Edge* in 2013, when we put *The Division* on the cover. How has life at Massive Entertainment changed since?**

It's changed in many ways, and the origin of many of those changes was the *launch* of *The Division*, rather than the announcement of *The Division*, because it's not always fair to ask questions about the final quality of a game and the capacity of a studio until they actually launch the game. And we needed to prove ourselves to Ubisoft with a major title, and once we did that in 2016, many things happened very quickly. One was that we decided to initiate the collaboration with Lightstorm on *Avatar*, which we had been discussing for quite some time. The second one was that we bought a whole city block in Malmö that we're transforming into our new office.

Obviously, we needed to hire a bunch of people. We were around 350 people in March 2016 when we shipped *The Division*; we're almost 700 today. So that's a tremendous, tremendous difference. And on top of that we've started a sibling studio in Stockholm, which is already over 50 people.

It's very hard to keep up as a person, because managing the company and the studio that we are today is very different from what we were in 2013. And I do spend quite a lot of time making sure that I remain on top of the current situation and not too stuck in old habits that might have been appropriate a few years ago.

**Back then, Massive had a flat structure, free of the sort of rigid hierarchies seen in most big western corporations. Is that still the case now you've grown so much?**

Absolutely: it's part of the way we believe that games are well made. If I hire the right people, they are experts in what they do, and that means that they probably know more about that particular area of expertise than I do. It's

more out of respect for the craftsperson, and the expert, that I don't want managers to tell people what to do. I want experts to tell managers what they need in order to be productive.

**That means you need to attract a very high standard of applicant, and Massive has hired at speed. That can't have been easy.**

There's always a lot of work required in good hiring – that should never be underestimated. And actually, the more sophisticated you are about your hiring process, the happier you will be later on. Obviously, we can always do better. But we're quite good at recruiting. It has helped to have both *The Division* and *Avatar* on the radar of developers, because those are two attractive projects. There's also Snowdrop, our technology, which is really based on being the best tool, the most efficient pipeline for developers, which in turn means they feel more enabled and more creative. That's attractive to a lot of people, not just engineers.

We also have a bit of a reputation as quite a meritocratic studio: people who get a job here will also tell their friends that, yeah, it's pretty cool, you get a huge degree of responsibility. So we're able to meet our recruitment goals, even though they're very high, and it's taken a tremendous amount of work to get there.

**You're maintaining one live game, are making a sequel to it and are also working on *Avatar*. These days, when a game launches, it is really only the beginning of its story. What challenges does that pose you as a head of studio?**

The situation we, and I think many studios, are in today requires much, much more sophisticated management – just when it comes to time, and shifts, and having backup plans and Padawans ready to take over and so on. But to be honest it's also one of my favourite areas to focus on. I would like every single employee to feel that it's relevant, and meaningful, and productive to stay at Massive for at least ten years. Yes, that's because I like being nice and I like being human. But it's also because, if you think about it, it takes three or four years to become a world-class developer – which means that, as an employer, years five to ten are extremely interesting.

If you look at the reasons why people stay in a job for longer than a few years, it's quite complicated. Money is only number eight on the list. It has to do with friendship, the quality of the task and tools, with autonomy, self-fulfilment... Above all, time management becomes really important, as does work/life balance. If you don't manage those phases well, people won't stay. The whole idea of old-school crunch is counterproductive to the studio strategy.



"IT'S UNDERSTOOD THAT LAUNCHING A GAME IS ONLY THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING THAT LASTS A LONG TIME"

**Crunch never really goes away, but it has been on people's minds again. How hard is it to avoid it in the live-service era, when the work never really stops?**

You know, I'd say that it's easier now, because it's well understood on all levels – from publishers, from gamers, from ourselves – that launching a game is only the beginning of something that lasts a long time. There was a time when you could argue that crunch made sense, because as soon as you shipped something on disc, you were done. Going from old habits to the ones we need to have today was really difficult; I think the industry still had a lot of people that believed crunch was still necessary, and a good practice, because you needed to make the best game you could by release date. But a live game requires constant attention. It's like a relationship.

**The Division had an awkward launch, and took some time to get to a point where it felt like your goals and players' expectations aligned. How did you navigate the studio through that difficult period?**

*The Division* at launch was extremely successful, if you look at the numbers – I think it was the fastest-selling game in Ubisoft's history. We were quite happy with the numbers, and we had a lot to do just on managing the backend, and the intensity of having millions of people playing the game simultaneously. So the first week was, 'This looks like a huge success. The burden on the infrastructure is extreme, so let's make sure we can manage that.'

But then people completed the game, and reached the far end of what we had produced, way quicker than we anticipated. And that created a bit of a vacuum, where there were some things that we did not have included on launch day that we were absolutely planning to add as we went, but people started asking for those things way before we were ready. And that's when we went into a bit of a frustrating loop where we knew what we wanted to do, and a lot of it was all already aligned with what the community was expecting. But then we also realised that some of our assumptions were incorrect. So we had to go back to the drawing board, and we needed more time to

make the game closer to what was actually the reality of the relationship between us and the players.

That time was also really frustrating for the community, because there was a developed opinion that *The Division* needed a couple of things and they weren't present, and we had become aware and we were working on it. And I think it really changed when we decided, before patch 1.4, to change the way we communicated about the game. I think we were in a little bit of a pressured position where we tried to defend some of our choices. But before patch 1.4, we said, 'Actually, you know, we agree with the players. So let's be completely transparent from now on, and just say it as it is. We think this is what we're seeing; we think the data looks like this; we think that your opinion is such; here's what we're planning to do, what we're going to do, and what we can't do.' It really changed from being a dialogue between two different parties to being a conversation between, I would say, two friends, and that changed the feeling in the dev team significantly. Because from our end it became, 'Let's not worry about what gamers think. Let's think of them as part of the design process.'

The mood in the community changed significantly when we started communicating transparently. In a way you could say we hadn't actually fixed anything, but the mood in the community changed just because we admitted that there were some things that we wanted to do better and we were working on them. The conversation, and the honesty of the conversation, was as important as what was in the game.

**You're avoiding those mistakes in the sequel, in part by putting much greater focus on the endgame. But a sequel also has to bring in new players. How do you walk that tightrope?**

If you look at the learnings we made from *The Division*, we know that people play the game in quite different ways. And people fall in love with different aspects of the game. *The Division* is expected to cater to quite a lot of tastes, which is never an easy thing. How do you create a game that caters to all that? The answer is that ►



Massive assisted Ubisoft Montreal by developing *Far Cry 3*'s deathmatch component



Massive also ran support on *Assassin's Creed*, including the modern-day Desmond sections in *Ezio-trilogy* closer *Revelations*







you have to create a monster game. I think this is a challenge for some other games that are in the same genre: you're expected to deliver on a lot of different tastes and preferences.

It's really fun to do, but it's not easy. And yet you also have to remember that Massive is a studio that is 20 years old, and we don't want the easiest challenge. We want to win the Champions League. And yes, that's really difficult, but that's why it's exciting to us.

**You often reference sport when talking about game development. Why is that?**

I come from art school — I have a master's degree in fine arts — and I started my career as an illustrator. My training in traditional management is, well, zero. In the beginning, when I found I was getting more responsibility, I read a lot of management books, but I didn't find any of them helpful. It confused me, because I was sure that the management handbooks they used in management schools would be amazing.

Then I realised that, at least for me, what we do in the game industry is much more similar to team sports, where you have extremely talented people who are used to being the best. They're used to winning, and they might have a big ego. They might be really particular about their own preferences and how they want things to work and so on. But as a coach, you *want* them to be like that. You want them to be hungry, and to be ambitious, and to be really demanding. Because if you can deliver on those expectations, you'll get access to the talent that those people have. And if you look at elite sports teams, in reality, that's what they do. They have 11 individuals in football on the field, but they also have a bunch of people behind that.

The job of the coach is more to say, 'Okay, how do I allow people to have all of that ambition, all of that ego and all of those passions and obsessions, but turn them into a team?' And that's where sports management is *extremely* sophisticated. And I would say much more advanced than anything you read in a management handbook. Because those are usually written for corporations where you need to motivate people to work. But in the game industry, as in sport, you don't need to motivate people. They're motivated by their own passion. So the challenge is not motivation; the challenge is actually to channel over-motivated people and turn them into a functioning group. I think since I started reading that kind of literature I've become a much better manager of game-development teams.

**You reference 'monster' games, which is quite a good way of describing Ubisoft's output. There's a perception that Ubisoft makes games to a**

**"MASSIVE IS 20 YEARS OLD, AND WE DON'T WANT THE EASIEST CHALLENGE. WE WANT TO WIN THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE"**

**particular template: how do you ensure Massive's work stands apart?**

Massive is a little bit known, internally in Ubisoft, to have too much tunnel vision, and be very, very focused on our own stuff. There is a lot of exchange and lots and lots of conversations and sharing within Ubisoft overall, which I think is extremely healthy because there are smart people everywhere. But in general, we're quite focused on what we do on our own. And I think we don't compare our own stuff so much with other Ubisoft games; we're looking much more at games that are made by other companies that we admire and can learn from, and also want to be better than. So I think our references are more, to be honest, whoever is the best in the world at the moment. And you need to look at that. I mean, it might be a Ubisoft game, it might be someone else's game, but you need to look at what they are doing. If you really aspire to win the Champions League, you need to study other people who have that capacity and learn from them.

**Does that cause you problems within Ubisoft?**

I think that on a bad week, we're considered to be a bit of a prima donna. On a good week, I think we're considered to be Steve Jobs. And the pendulum swings back and forth between the two.

**The Avatar announcement was a surprising one — at first, Massive doesn't seem like a natural fit for a movie tie-in. How did the project come about, and what are your ambitions for it?**

I met James Cameron and Jon Landau in 2012, before we had even announced *The Division*, even, with the idea of potentially collaborating on the movies that they were in the planning stages of making. Over the four years between that first meeting and when we finally signed the contract, it was steady trust-building on both sides. They were looking for an incredibly specific partner for what they wanted to see in the game. And what they're looking for was very attractive for ►



2007's *World In Conflict* brought Massive valuable experience of running online games. Its servers were only taken offline in 2015





Little is known about Massive's Avatar game, though the fact it has been selected for the licence speaks volumes for how far it has come

us, because they don't want a game that follows the movies or is like, 'Here's an interactive version of stuff you saw in the movie.'

They are expecting the game to deliver on everything that the movie *can't* deliver on, which is really that emotion that people had after seeing *Avatar*; we expect that emotion to be the same in *Avatar 2*, which is 'I really want to go there. I want to see what it's like to be on Pandora. I want to have my own adventure.' And I think you remember this 'Avatar depression,' where people came out of the movie and they had such strong feelings of longing to be on Pandora that they got even, you know, potentially depressed by it. And the game is supposed to deliver on that expectation, which is created by the movies.

That means that it has to be a huge, vast, new creative experience, which has a lot to offer that is *not* in the movies, because it needs to be this journey of discovery as well. I think if it would have been a traditional licensed project, we wouldn't have been interested at all. This is really one of the ultimate challenges: how do you build a place that is so specific and unique as Pandora, as an open-world game, that is surprising and actually exceeds the expectations that were created in the movie? It's very hard. And also the movie is probably two hours long, but people will spend up to 800 hours in the game. So if you can imagine the work that is required to make a two-hour movie of that quality, then how do you create an 800-hour experience that matches that? That is really the challenge that we wanted, and that is extremely, *extremely* inspiring to us.

**It sounds like something you need a fresh round of consoles for. What do you hope to see from the next generation of hardware?**

Every generation brings stuff that we like on the development side, because it gives us more capacity. Visually, it's always rewarding to have a new generation, because it means we can push the graphics further. We're almost always only limited by hardware. Then, with this generation I'm sure we'll see the shift towards streaming as a distribution model. That still means that people need some form of hardware, consoles included, but within... I don't know how many years, but let's say five, streaming will be the most common distribution form for games. And for developers that changes things even more, because we have access to the cloud, and some really powerful machinery that is infrastructure and not something people need to have at home.

**It's five-and-a-half years since we put *The Division* on the cover, and Massive has changed tremendously. What do you hope for the studio to achieve over the next half-decade?**

Maybe I've become a little bit wiser, but my main focus at the moment is to take care of the opportunity we have been given. When I was younger, I would probably just start new things and keep pushing everything. But right now we have a fantastic opportunity with *The Division*, and *Avatar* and *Snowdrop*, and I want to take good care of that first of all. I think it's time for us to prove that we are on that level of craftsmanship, where people can consistently rely on us to deliver high-quality games. ■



AN AUDIENCE WITH...





# T H E M A K I N G O F . . .



## F A B L E . I I

Breadcrumbs, Buffy and bucolic Britain: the story of  
Lionhead's most magical Fable of all

BY CHRIS SCHILLING

Format 360  
Developer Lionhead Studios  
Publisher Microsoft Game Studios  
Origin UK  
Release 2008



Everyone remembers *that* promise. When Lionhead co-founder **Peter Molyneux** said *Fable* players would be able to plant an acorn and eventually see it flourish into a giant oak tree, his mouth was writing a cheque the game would never be able to cash. But if *Fable* didn't quite live up to Molyneux's ambitious billing, the debut game from brothers **Dene** and **Simon Carter** and their team at Big Blue Box (which was subsumed into Lionhead) captured the hearts of players across the globe with its irresistible humour and a gorgeous world that, oak trees notwithstanding, responded to your actions. Its sales impressed publisher Microsoft, and a sequel was a cast-iron certainty.

*Fable II*, however, got off to a slow start. "We were all pretty knackered after *Fable*," Molyneux tells us. "We'd put an enormous amount of work into it, especially the team, and we were a bit burnt out." Yet there was hardly a shortage of ideas on the table – as Simon recalls, more ideas *didn't* make it into *Fable* than did. "Dene and I had been thinking about *Fable* for at least ten years before we started on it, and not necessarily in the most grounded of ways," he says. "We were children, dreaming up a game about simulation, self-expression, magic, gothic horror and unintended consequences, who became young adults who didn't know enough to know what was possible. That it ended as well as it did is a miracle, and a testament to an incredibly talented team."

Some of those ideas made it into *The Lost Chapters*, an add-on which released a year later. While a smaller team worked on the DLC, Dene shifted across to *Fable II*, keen to establish the foundations that would give the rest of the development team plenty to do. "The problem when you're a small studio making a large game is that you end up with a bunch of people who have literally nothing to do until you're well into pre-production," he says. "You can't write scripts for quests when there's no world to put them in."

**That world was** still Albion, a lush, romanticised vision of pre-industrial Britain. But it had to change, and not just because it was being developed for new hardware. The Carters didn't want players to feel they'd seen everything before. "We started joking about Blackadder and how that used large time-jumps to refresh the series," Dene says. Christophe Gans' action epic *Brotherhood Of The Wolf* also became a key aesthetic touchstone. "It was set in the 1700s and we thought that its visual style was perfect



The beginner-friendly approach was born from the view that a casual audience wasn't being served by console games

for this kind of reinvention. Tricorns and flintlocks still held enough of a fairytale feel for us to be comfortable with the period, visually speaking."

Even so, 500 years was quite the leap forward. This was Molyneux's idea, Dene says. "I can't remember exactly why, but I think he didn't trust the audience to believe that a world could change so much in just 100 years." And Molyneux admits that the decision ultimately came back to bite him. "We made this decision

## "TRICORNS AND FLINTLOCKS STILL HELD ENOUGH OF A FAIRYTALE FEEL FOR US TO BE COMFORTABLE WITH THE PERIOD"

that time should have moved along, and the world of Albion should have evolved. In *Fable*, the capital, Bowerstone, is a collection of 20 or so houses, and in *Fable II* we really wanted to have this big, thriving city." Shifting the timeline forwards hundreds of years seemed a good idea at the time, albeit less so when Molyneux began to think about *Fable III* and beyond. "We realised, 'Oh shit, we're moving through time too fast. Before we know it, *Fable* will be set in space!'"

For art director **John McCormack**, the jump was a double-edged sword: the gap made his job easier in that he could differentiate the look of the game more from the original. But with less existing material to fall back on, and a move to more powerful hardware, getting the look right was a time-consuming process – if, evidently, an enjoyable one. "It was the perfect game for my first outing as art director," he says. "I'd been senior artist and animator on the original and

helped build the style with Ian Lovett and the other artists in the first place, so taking the helm on the sequel was less daunting in terms of a consistent vision for the world and familiarity with the team. The time gap allowed me to explore a time period I was really interested in, and put my own stamp on a world that I genuinely cared about with a group of trusted friends."

That world was to be much larger, too, with the relatively compact areas of the original game replaced with more physically open environments. With players now able to vault fences, climb and swim, Dene hoped *Fable II* would live up to that original concept he and his brother had dreamed up – that here was a game in which "you could do almost anything, including having children." For Simon, meanwhile, it was all about finding the balance between delivering on promises unkept while "retaining the accidental magic of the original."

Part of that magic, Molyneux says, was down to *Fable's* accessibility. RPGs had become too complex and niche, he reckoned. This led to one of the sequel's more controversial changes: the removal of player death. Fall in combat, and you're left scarred by your ordeal, but otherwise intact. "Peter and [Lionhead co-founder] Mark Webley were playing *Zelda* at the time, and noticed that they never died, and that they didn't mind," Dene explains. "They were also of the opinion that people only stopped playing a game forever after they'd died. It came from that desire to keep people playing without a break for as long as possible."

"We had lots of philosophical discussions about what death meant," Molyneux says. "We were looking at games like *World Of Warcraft* and their respawning mechanics." At first, this sparked an even more radical idea: Molyneux imagined each death would see you reincarnated as the soul of another character, giving you the opportunity to be someone else entirely. "But we felt that that would make combat a little bit less exciting. So there were a lot of philosophical talks about the moral implications of death."

The idea, it's fair to say, was not well-received by everyone at Lionhead. "The idea of removing death was something Peter was very insistent on, and everyone else resistant to. How would the player feel any sense of accomplishment if there was no threat?" Simon recalls.

"There was a lot of eyebrow-raising about the no-death feature, internally," Dene agrees. "Several people argued that people who don't have a reasonable level of game competence, ►



or who don't have any interest in mastery, don't tend to buy consoles. But *Fable's* audience wasn't ever supposed to be the stat-lovers or hardcore grind fans. *Fable* was never about 'can you do it?', but 'how will you do it?'" Molyneux's persistence paid off, and the decision made sense in light of the way people had played *Fable* – tending to reload and carry on their current quest. "*Fable* was always meant to be about the experience rather than the challenge, so removing the tedium of having to replay the same content ultimately made some sense," Simon admits.

For much the same reason, *Fable's* morality options were clearly signposted, even though some saw this as too simplistic or binary. "To us it was the core of real roleplaying," Dene says. "To give people ways of playing quests that match their preferred character type rather than saying, 'Save these people!' only to pull the rug from under them with, 'Ha! They were all evil, you idiot!' That might be clever, but it usually doesn't make the player feel good. And that's really *Fable*, and Lionhead, in a nutshell: always trying to make the audience feel good."

**The feelgood factor** came partly from the game's quintessentially British sense of humour. And if a game being unashamedly British doesn't seem like a selling point in 2019, back then *Fable's* parochial character was a big part of its charm. "I think we were totally unaware of quite how British we were until the point where we were telling Microsoft that we wanted the game to feel like a fairytale, and not some sub-Tolkien nonsense with orcs in it," Dene says. "Someone responded: 'You mean with fucking singing bugs and shit?' Luckily, Lionhead's producer at Microsoft, Rick Martinez, had their back. "He said something along the lines of, 'More like Grimm's Fairy Tales. You ever read those?'"

It's easy to forget this was a time when RPGs tended to take themselves very seriously; *Fable*, by contrast, was more than happy to poke fun at the genre's tropes. "Standing in front of some chap wearing a monk's robe and the head of a cat, while he listlessly informs you of the importance of your next grind quest, is inherently silly. For a team of cynical Brits, that was almost irresistible," Simon tells us. And yet much of the game's humour was informed by an American: the contrasting of the strange and magical with the cosy and domestic was inspired by Joss Whedon's *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, of which the Carters were both big fans.

If *Fable II* was all about making you feel good, one striking mid-game sequence was designed to

## Q&A

**Peter Molyneux**  
Creative director, *Fable II*



**When an idea is met with resistance, how do you decide if it's worth persevering?**

There are three factors you have to measure when you're creating something. There's the sanity of an idea and then there's what the team thinks of an idea. People who are going to work on it *have* to be excited about the idea, otherwise it's not worth their salt. And lastly there is the amount of time your publisher has given you. When I first proposed to the team that the big feature of *Fable II* would be a dog, their first reaction was, 'What the fuck are you talking about, man, that's just the most stupid idea we've ever heard.' And in my mind I was thinking, 'Okay, I can see their reaction is not good but I just need to do more work on that idea to prove it.'

**Was it a similar thing with Microsoft?**

Microsoft had these quarterly business reviews where we'd cover the latest and greatest iteration of an idea, and lots of times they'd shoot it down. Then your job as the boss is to fight a battle. And you either see the sense of what they're saying and pull back on design or you push it through. At every stage, ideas have to be nurtured like you nurture a seed: as long as you look after them and explain them well, then it should be okay. It's frustrating because sometimes as head of design you want to go in and say, 'Look, it's gonna be a dog, all right? Fucking shut up.' It's a cycle that never ends.

**Was there anything you couldn't include that you'd have liked to?**

There was one feature I can't remember that Simon pushed back on. He basically said, 'Look, technically there's just no way this can work,' and in that situation you just have to listen to the guy and [accept] there's nothing you can do. But Simon and Dene... wow. What amazing people. Even just thinking of them now makes my heart sing. They were so incredibly dedicated. And in fact the whole team was just outstandingly brilliant. Although I can come up with these disruptive ideas it was only their brilliance that actually turned them into what *Fable II* was.

do the opposite, turning the game's morality on its head. As a prison guard in the Tattered Spire, a magical monument-cum-prison, you would be set a series of cruel demands. Starving and killing inmates would earn you experience but also evil points; refusing would result in an electric shock, causing you to lose experience and gain scars for your insubordination. "It was always part of the plan, but for a rather convoluted reason," Dene

explains. "We wanted to follow through on our 'For every choice a consequence' mantra. We had plans for a bunch of regions to change based on your actions and needed a couple of big time-jumps in the game for these to make sense."

Yet the Spire could have been darker still. As Dene and Molyneux recall, there were torture scenes and even suggestions that the prisoners would be attached to HR Giger-like feeding tubes. But Molyneux, keen not to upset younger players, vetoed the idea. "He was generally against anything that would disturb children," Dene says, "Despite the game's mature rating – and the condoms scattered around the world." Sex was a real bone of contention between Lionhead and Microsoft. If the publisher had few issues with the game's Britishness, it was more conservative in other regards. "We had to push pretty hard on having the same-sex content we had in the game and there were lots of justifications of that," Molyneux says. "Their point was that there are portions of America who are – even to this day, but especially back then – very resistant to it."

If the shock of The Spire was all about Lionhead's desire to create moments that *Fable II* players would remember years after finishing the game, another such feature would have a much friendlier face. *Fable II's* dog was originally going to be a horse; others suggested a pet dragon or a fairy, in keeping with the magical theme of the game, but that would be easier to implement. But Molyneux's stubbornness won the day again. "He wanted it to be the best dog anyone had ever seen in a game," Dene says. "It was another one of those things that everyone would have liked in the game in some form, but which nobody wanted to spend that amount of time on." Well, almost nobody. "We did discuss other possible pets, but the dog always stood head and shoulders above everything else," Molyneux insists. "Also, dogs are known for their loyalty, whereas cats and owls... well, cats certainly are known for having more of a free spirit. So really the dog did everything that we envisaged."

An unlikely USP it may have been, but you will find few *Fable II* players who *didn't* become attached to their canine companion. Implementing it, however, was one of the biggest challenges Lionhead faced – it had "more engineering years put into it than probably any other feature in the game," Simon tells us. Its programming was rewritten from scratch, Molyneux reveals, partly because in its initial guise, it was simply too good – sniffing out treasures from distance and barking alerts at the slightest sign of danger. "We pulled ►





1 The lack of non-interactive cutscenes was warmly received in an age of unskippable cinematics, but was at least partly due to technological limitations, Dene Carter says. Having so many villagers on top of a hero whose appearance – in physique and attire – could vary wildly left little texture memory spare on Xbox 360.

2 Realtime character morphing allowed for more noticeable physical changes to player characters, including scarring and wounds. Simon: "An unintended benefit was that we could use this to help give death some consequence."

3 *Fable II*'s bandits came in larger groups than their equivalents in the first game, and were significantly more likely to ambush an unwitting player, dropping from trees or springing suddenly out of foliage. They're more tactically astute than before, too.

4 Early sketches of *Fable II*'s travelling community, some of the friendliest characters you could hope to encounter in all of Albion.

5 McCormack: "We put in a lot of effort to make the hero change with the moral choices of the player but found that there was only so far you could go with this, especially with the 'good' path. The real fun came when we let the player mix their morality with lifestyle, gender and clothing"





## THE MAKING OF...

back on it a lot, so it was less useful than some of the implementations, but that made it a lot more endearing," Molyneux says. "Because it wasn't too powerful, and it also wasn't underpowered."

The studio had a similar balance to strike with another key feature. The golden breadcrumb trail was designed to solve a grievance Molyneux had with RPGs, acting as a safety net of sorts to let you wander off the beaten track, safe in the knowledge that you'd be able to find your way back. "My aggravation with open-world games when you're working out where to go is that you're not looking at the beautiful world that you're running through – you end up looking at the fucking mini-map the whole time. So we thought of this idea of an in-world trail that you could choose to follow. If you didn't follow it, nothing bad happened; it was purely so that you were immersed more in the world than in this tiny little mini-map."

Along with the dog, this was "probably the biggest source of team frustration," Dene says. Some staff balked at the idea of being led by the nose, even though you could choose to ignore it. But removing the map was, for some, the straw that broke the camel's back. "He kept insisting that the breadcrumb trail would lead to more exploration, not less, as people would always feel safe. But those of us who liked RPGs thought precisely the opposite – without a map it's hard to get your bearings."

Yet the team's reaction was nothing compared to the technical challenge it presented. "Even in *Red Dead Redemption 2*, if you go off the path, it takes a little time for it to update. But if you've got it *in-world* it has to be pretty much 100 percent reactive to whatever you're doing," Molyneux says. It was Simon who ultimately solved that problem, essentially by casting an invisible NPC – with the same navigation system as other NPCs – as the trail. "But navigation systems are designed to give you the absolute shortest path between two points, and that path might oscillate wildly between two adjacent starting points. And navigation across large terrains took a lot of CPU power and had to be run as background processes. As a result we spent a ridiculous amount of time making the breadcrumb trail not produce alarmingly schizophrenic results *and* not eat up a whole Xbox 360." Still, as most players would attest, it just about worked. Enough, Molyneux believes, for Microsoft to take a patent out on it – one he's confident it holds to this day.

Both the dog and the breadcrumb trail took essentially the game's entire development to get right, Dene notes, acknowledging that there were inevitable trade-offs as a result. "When you're

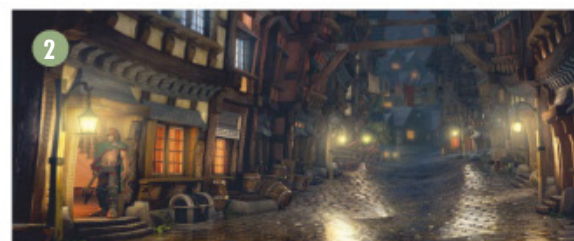
trying to make a game where you can do almost anything, you look at features like that and think, 'Well, that's probably two monsters and a bunch of combat animation that's not going to happen, now, isn't it?'" he says.

Indeed, the ending of the game demonstrates that Lionhead didn't always find the right balance between novelty and content. Originally, a huge climactic encounter was planned. The player would fight through the Spire alongside the other heroes who would all fall, leading to a one-on-one confrontation between the player and antagonist Lucien, set against a background of jagged chunks of Spire matter piercing the world. But with just months to go, the studio's senior management gathered to discuss the workload and decided there was no way they could make it in time. "Peter suggested we just can the whole sequence and have Reaver do his thing," Dene says, referring to the way Stephen Fry's enigmatic rogue finishes off the boss if the player waits too long.

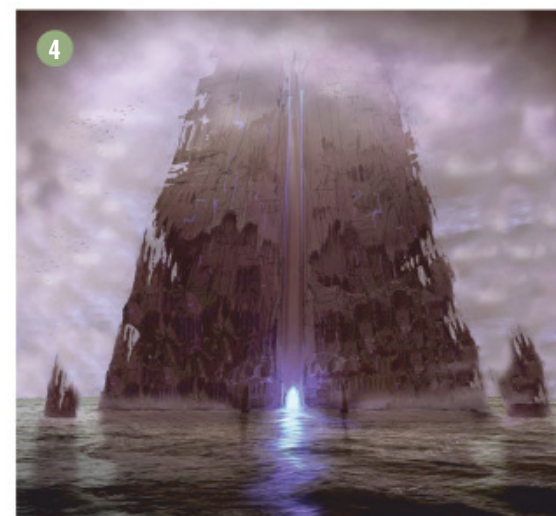
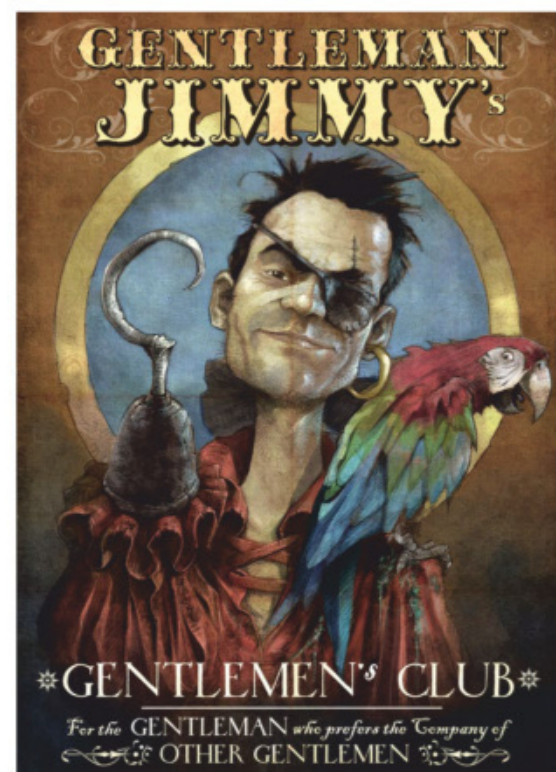
**Most staff were** naturally horrified, he recalls, but their exasperation soon turned to acceptance. "The thing about triple-A is that you're always trying to balance the featureset with your marketing obligations," Dene continues. "Once millions have been spent on advertising, shelf-space and discoverability, it's really hard to say, 'Oh, can we have another two months to finish this with a bang?' That's how studios get shut down. Although in retrospect, a lot of other things, like being told to make your RPG into a MOBA, seem to cause that, too."

And yet between the technical challenges and internal disagreements, Lionhead had achieved a certain alchemy, one potent enough to compensate for the game's flaws. *Fable II* was not perfect, but it had soul and silliness to spare. As Simon recalls, the studio got wind of the **Edge** review (a 9) on the eve of the game's launch party, the news making the evening all the more enjoyable: "The combination of profound relief and unlimited alcohol was potentially life-threatening."

As more praise came in, Lionhead's efforts had been validated: for all the conflict and compromise, it had delivered on the series' promise of a warm, welcoming and genuinely reactive world – one it's never quite recaptured since. "I think the gaming world is poorer without an Albion to disappear into," McCormack says. "With *Fable II*, we weren't afraid to let the player truly express themselves and be the hero they wanted to be. That might not seem like a big thing now, but it wasn't exactly commonplace back then. And we had the hate mail and fan mail to prove it." ■







- 1 These posters are typical of the game's eccentric humour. "We found the more British we made it, the more it worked with players, in particular the American audience," McCormack says.
- 2 *Fable II*'s version of Bowerstone looks very different from the original.
- 3 The end may have been curtailed, but the big battle against the Great Shard does feel appropriately climactic.
- 4 For *The Spire*, Lionhead's artists used straight lines and sharp edges to contrast with the soft curves elsewhere. It was designed to make it feel like "the antithesis of nature," McCormack says.
- 5 "The game opens in the overcrowded squalor of Bowerstone and ends in The Spire, so we made sure that the rest of the world retained the rural charm and familiarity of the original so the player knew what they were trying to save," McCormack explains. "Like the way Tolkien's hobbits reminisce about The Shire as a motivation to carry on."
- 6 The Old Town can become an untidy slum through a choice you make.
- 7 A concept for a Tower Guardian





**STUDIO PROFILE**

# VIRTUOS

The hired hands helping to  
build some of gaming's  
biggest, brightest worlds

**By CHRIS SCHILLING**





Trends come and go, but there are two simple and inescapable truths in the modern videogame industry: games are getting bigger, and there are more of them than ever before. As a result, between blockbusters and remasters, publishers and developers alike are becoming increasingly reliant on outsourcing, inviting external studios to help make up the numbers whenever more artists and coders are required. This naturally represents an opportunity for those prepared to capitalise on those needs, and few companies are better positioned to do so than Virtuos. Founded in Shanghai in 2004, it now boasts seven development studios across the world, having expanded substantially over the past decade-and-a-half. By March 2010 it had 500 staff. Today, it has three times as many.

Perhaps fittingly, it was established by a former employee of Ubisoft, whose games have become a truly global concern. Though developed primarily in Quebec, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* alone had support from Ubisoft's studios in Montreal, Bucharest, Kiev, The Philippines – and more notably, Shanghai and Chengdu, from where two of Virtuos' larger studios operate, as well as Singapore, where its HQ is based. Indeed, CEO Gilles Langourieux came to China as MD of Ubisoft's online division to set up the publisher's Shanghai branch. When he returned in 2004, it was to found Virtuos. "He came back out here with strong knowledge of the up-and-coming consoles: the PS3 and Xbox 360," general manager of Virtuos Shanghai **Elijah Freeman** tells us. "He basically knew there was going to be a lot more need for [outsourced] content. He went about establishing a team to address these issues and, well, the rest is history. We've grown every year, almost, since then."

Langourieux's connections made for a predictable client list in Virtuos' early days: its earliest projects were for Gameloft and Ubisoft. It's still working with Ubi, in fact, and a sign of how far it's come since can be seen in the types of game to which Virtuos has put its name. Back then, it was *Beowulf* on PSP. Now it's *Assassin's Creed: The Ezio Collection* and the publisher's bold gambit in the toys-to-life market, *Starlink: Battle For Atlas*. Albeit at a smaller scale, it's always been working on console games.

"One of the things that really put Virtuos on the map was our ability to do that out of China," Freeman says. Its reputation has steadily grown during its 15 years in operation, bringing Virtuos into the direct orbit of a range of industry giants



**Tian Li and Elijah Freeman are general managers at Virtuos' Chengdu and Shanghai studios respectively**

including Activision, Electronic Arts, Microsoft, Sony and Square Enix. Its website proudly announces that it has partnered with "18 of the top 20 digital entertainment companies in the world" and includes a string of testimonials from developers and publishers.

It's evident that Virtuos is a highly organised operation, with no detail overlooked from the moment a new studio is established. Finding the right team for the job, Freeman says, is key. "We

a constant and regular communication," Freeman elaborates. "Our communication plan outlines who we should be talking to, when we should be talking to them, who needs to hear what information, the contact list of the people that are involved... all the key members on a team contribute their names to our current partner and make sure they're aware of this."

'Partner' is the key word here. Virtuos is no longer just a studio where some work is shipped out to be finished and returned; it wants to work closely enough with developers so that it feels like an extension of the development team. "We feel the same things, we have the same

## "WE LOOK CLOSELY AT THE COMPOSITION OF TEAMS, SO WE'RE GENERALLY READY TO TAKE ON ANY PROJECT"

have skillsets across all of our different studios that vary quite a bit. We look closely at the composition of teams to make sure that we have an accurate setup and we configure the team according to the needs of our client. So we're generally ready to take on any project." Versatility is paramount, whether it's finding the right new hire, or using employees from another Virtuos team with particular specialities to assist. "If there's someone that's really familiar with, say, a specific type of rendering requirement, then we'll go to one of the other studios and see if they can support us in that activity," he says. "But in general we have the resources we need in-house, and we're used to working that way."

**Virtuos now has** seven development centres in all, with outlets in Ho Chi Minh City, Xi'an, Paris and Dublin. This has introduced some inevitable complications, but over time it has developed systems so that they can operate smoothly in tandem with one another. "Our studios all overlap in time zones so we can have

meetings, we're getting the same direction and we're building the same product," Freeman nods. We wonder if there's been a deliberate push towards that. Has Virtuos asked to be more involved, or have its relationships with developers changed simply through being asked to contribute more over time, as games grow more complex and labour-intensive? "We're conscious of that change, and we push for it because we want to deliver the best quality product," Freeman says. "But I would say it's also been an organic type of evolution. And clients are needing that from us. They don't just come and say, 'Hey, we want you to build seven lamp-posts'. Now they say, 'We need seven lamp-posts on a street that looks like this – can you concept it out and then figure out the gameplay around it?'. In other words, they're asking for more, because their internal teams have their hands full. "Back in the day, if you think about it, nine or ten hours' worth of gameplay was a lot. But now you're talking about games that have hundreds of hours of gameplay."



**Founded** 2004

**Employees** 1,500

**Key staff** Gilles Langourieux (CEO), Elijah Freeman (GM, Virtuos Shanghai), Tian Li (GM, Virtuos Chengdu)

**URL** [www.virtuosgames.com](http://www.virtuosgames.com)

**Selected softography** *Crash: Mind Over Mutant*, *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, *Heavy Rain HD*, *Assassin's Creed: The Ezio Collection*, *Dark Souls Remastered*

**Current projects** *Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD*



## STUDIO PROFILE



Porting games to Switch can be a challenge – those dinky cartridges mean Virtuos has to find ways to cut down the overall size of the game being ported while preserving the original's performance and visual quality. It's something at which the company excels

For Virtuos, the games and the names have grown bigger. The terrific iOS port of *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, for example, has the studio's fingerprints all over it. But this was a rare mobile release for a developer primarily focused on console. More indicative of its output are the likes of *Fable Anniversary*, and the *Heavy Rain* remaster on PS4, while Rockstar Games was added to that enviable list with the recent refits of *LA Noire*. And Virtuos is acutely aware that the more games like that it can add to its catalogue, the more projects will come to it. It certainly helps that, among its peers in China, it's in a unique position. "Tech giants like Tencent are so focused on the mobile industry instead of console gaming because the income is much more," Chengdu DM **Tian Li** says. "In China the console is still a relatively small market. So I think at Virtuos we actually have even more space to grow. Chasing these Chinese technology giants won't be an easy job for us. But I do think there are an awful lot of young people here who have a real passion for console gaming." He's not just talking about potential players, but employees. In China, there are relatively few opportunities to work on really big games, and so Virtuos staff are naturally excited whenever another major project comes through the door, Freeman says. "They love to be contributing to something that's bigger than themselves."

The remaster has become a central pillar of Virtuos' business in recent years: most recently, its impressive work on *Dark Souls Remastered* for Switch generated a spike of interest in the company. With such a strong grounding in mobile and console games, it's no wonder this powerful yet portable hardware has proved an irresistibly good fit for Virtuos, and Freeman notes that the studio's games have done "exceptionally well", both critically and commercially. That response has opened up more doors, and Li

can foresee a similar reaction when the HD remasters of *Final Fantasy X* and *X-2* launch on Switch and Xbox in April. "Now the industry knows about our capacity for Switch development, so this will definitely bring us more opportunities in the coming year."

This particular project has not been without its challenges – on both formats, though one was more than the other. The initial conversion process was difficult in itself, but fitting the games onto Switch's fairly modest cartridges has been a tight squeeze. Virtuos has spent time finding ways to shrink the overall package size to make it fit without impacting performance and visual quality. "We put a dedicated team to working on

as many as we can. We find it – at least I personally do – difficult to turn down projects. I can say fortunately, since I've been here, I have not turned down a project."

**It's a sense** of responsibility, rather than pressure, that drives Virtuos when handling some of the biggest games in the world, Freeman says. The company has built a level of trust with its partners, and everyone is committed to ensuring that its high standards don't slip in any way. "At the very least, we have to match the quality of that team at home," he says. "Because we're far away, we make sure that we are always exceeding expectations. This gives the client

### "SO WHEN SOMEONE HAS THAT DESIRE TO MAP OUT THE WHOLE UNIVERSE, WE'RE THERE TO BUILD IT"

this kind of problem," Li says. "So it's kind of mixing the two approaches – we have the core porting team solving the main problems and we have a small technical team to attack the individual problems on specific platforms."

How, then, do Li and Freeman decide which jobs to take on? The answer, Freeman says, is pretty straightforward. For every approach it receives from developers, Virtuos clearly considers what's being asked of it, the resources it currently has and the timescale of the project. Yet the company is now so large that it doesn't need to worry too much. With 1,500 people across all its studios, Virtuos can accept pretty much any offer that comes its way, no matter how large or small. "Periodically there might be something that doesn't match our skillset," he says. "But in general we do our best to take on

the feeling of comfort that they're going to get the quality that they expect."

All of which increases the likelihood that Virtuos isn't done growing just yet. Games are not getting any smaller, after all, and those remakes and remasters seem to be more in demand with each passing year. It depends on the market, Freeman says, but it's absolutely in the company's interests to expand further still – you might even say it has a responsibility to do so, as it attracts more work from its estimable list of development partners. "We have to be able to match the market. We want gamers to be able to play whenever they want to play. We want to help create environments and worlds as big as anybody can imagine. So when someone has that desire to map out the whole universe, we're there to build it." ■





- ❶ In recent years, Virtuos artists have also contributed to the *Battlefield* series.
- ❷ *Assassin's Creed: The Ezio Collection*'s current-gen makeover featured superior lighting and effects work.
- ❸ *Crash: Mind Over Mutant* was one of the studio's earlier projects, releasing in 2008.
- ❹ The studio first ported *Final Fantasy X/X-2 HD Remaster* to PS3 and Vita in 2013.
- ❺ From *Forza Motorsport 3* to *Forza Horizon 4*, Virtuos has had a long-standing involvement with the series.
- ❻ The iOS port of *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* is one of Virtuos' highest-rated games.
- ❼ Virtuos helped China's SeaSun Games with martial arts MMORPG *JX Online III*.
- ❽ *Heavy Rain HD* was the second game Virtuos co-developed on PS4



# PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

## STILL PLAYING

### **Super Mario Party** Switch

The most senior of the **Edge** brood, we are happy to report, has finally tired of *Mario Kart*. We approach *Super Mario Party* with some trepidation – playing against each other will do nothing for the kid's self-esteem. Praise be, then, for River Survival mode, which allows us to work together, syncing Joy-Con motions to row a boat and cooperating in a series of minigames. If only the AI companions weren't so thick.

### **Destiny 2** PC

With the power cap reached on two characters on PS4, and *Anthem*, *The Division 2* and *Apex Legends* either set to eat into our free time or already guzzling it, it's time to put Bungie's space opera down for a nap. But we can't resist giving it a runout on PC in honour of an on-loan GPU. After 1,500 hours of 30fps, a 144Hz refresh rate is like scales falling from our eyes. It's going to be tough to go back, though the thought of getting our lovely loot all over again prompts a deep existential dread.

### **Super Smash Bros Ultimate** Switch

Piranha Plant may have seemed a questionable addition to the Smash roster, but this versatile heavyweight is quickly becoming an **Edge** favourite. Its long-stem strike can hit enemies from ludicrous range, while spitting out spiked balls is both an effective anti-air strategy and the game's funniest edgeguarding technique – unless, of course, you're on the receiving end.

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edition of **Edge** for  
extra Play content



# Elevator music

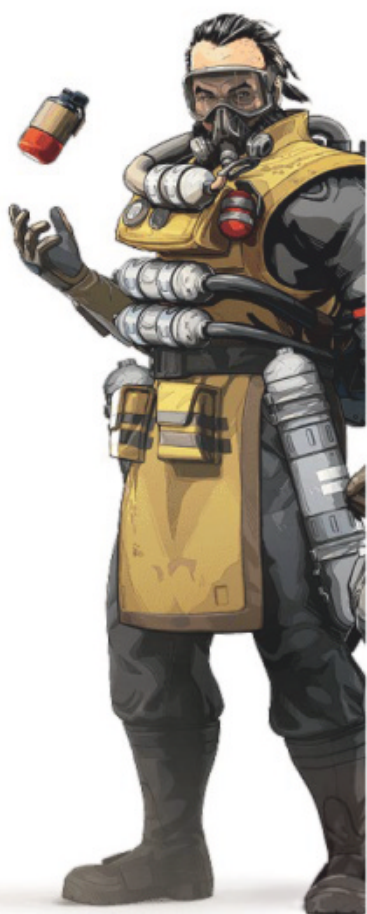
Round these parts we are, as you might expect, ardent fans of the written word. And if you're reading this, we assume you are too. Yet it's not easy communicating through text the intricacies of a game's appeal. Indeed, reducing some of the games that have fallen under our critical gaze this month to their component parts does not make for enthralling reading.

Perhaps the biggest culprit is *Apex Legends* (p102). If we told you the *Titanfall* devs had just surprise-released a free-to-play hero-shooter battle royale, would you run for the nearest console, or simply to the hills? It's a deeply uninspiring pitch, surely the product of the boardroom before the development floor. It is not so much an idea for a videogame as the centre of a buzzword Venn diagram. Of course EA greenlit it: as a concept, it prints money. But to scene-savvy players it is a miserable elevator pitch. Yet, as you'll likely know for yourself by now –

at the time of writing, the game has amassed 25 million players in the space of a week – it's an absolute cracker.

Elsewhere this month we find plenty of similar opportunities. *Wargroove* (p114)? An *Advance Wars* clone. *Resident Evil 2* (p110)? A 20-year-old game with new graphics. *Revolve8* (p120)? *Clash Royale*, but anime. Okay, actually, that one sounds pretty cool, but you get the idea. Now put yourself in the shiny, diamond-encrusted shoes of your average publishing executive, and ask yourself how often you'd make the right decision.

The lessons here are twofold. First, there is normally more to a game than initially meets the eye, and perhaps we could all do with less scepticism, and agree not to rush to judgement quite so quickly. The second is that the job of the videogame critic is a difficult one indeed, and you should all send us some presents.



Images of insects



# Apex Legends

This is how genres evolve, and why gaming needs its copycats. To see *Apex Legends*' core conceit written down is to behold a deeply offputting sort of buzzword salad, a game that hitches itself to every popular games-as-service bandwagon of the past couple of years. It takes the hero shooter of *Overwatch* and *Rainbow 6: Siege*, drops it into *PUBG*'s Battle Royale, envelops it in *Fortnite*'s free-to-play and chucks in every vaguely workable monetisation model it can think of. On paper, it looks like a travesty – until you get to who is developing it. In Respawn Entertainment's hands, what might have been a disaster becomes something quite transcendent. This is the biggest leap forward for the battle royale since players first set foot on Erangel.

Lest we forget, Respawn has form for this sort of thing – taking an established template and elevating it with a series of what-ifs. In the *Titanfall* games it introduced AI mobs to online deathmatches to ensure that even novice players could feel useful. In the titular summonable mecha it put killstreaks on a reducible cooldown to ensure everybody got a turn with the best toys. In the Smart Pistol it devised a gun you didn't even need to aim, and in Burn Cards it found a way to make every life feel different. So it is here. Respawn has looked at every aspect of the battle royale, considered its problems, its peccadilloes and frustrations, and thought about how each might be fixed, improved or redefined.

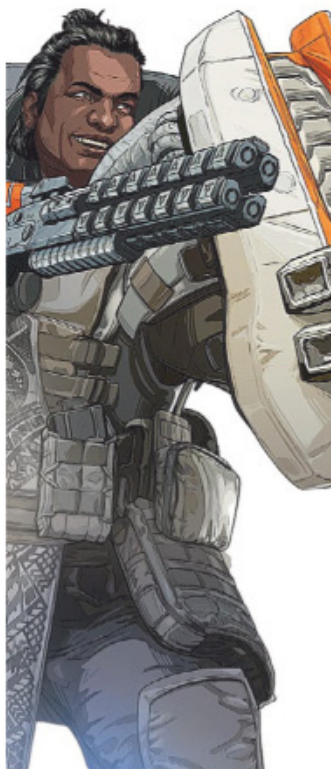
Everything flows from the developer's insistence, at least at launch, that *Apex Legends* only be playable in a squad of three. Previous battle royales have offered a choice of solo or duo play because of the frustration that is inherent in being asked to play in a randomly matchmade team. No one talks – at least not in language you'd like to hear. Perhaps someone decides to jump early and ends up halfway across the map from you. Maybe your teammates die early on, leaving you with a near-impossible fight against the odds. Or perhaps an ally hoovers up the gear and restoratives you desperately need from under your nose. In *Apex Legends*, despite the enforced squad play, such awkward situations rarely come to pass.

It begins with, well, the beginning. The game randomly appoints one of the team as Jumpmaster, putting them in control of when the team leaves the dropship and the group's ensuing flightpath. If you're not picked, you can separate from the leader; doing so just before landing ensures the three of you don't all try to loot the closest building, but doing it too early is practically suicide. While each character in the currently eight-strong roster has their own passive, active and ultimate ability, almost all have been designed to work with others. Flying solo is rarely a sensible option.

Those character abilities have been finely balanced, feeling overpowered only when used in the ideal circumstances – and even then, only when your

**Developer** Respawn Entertainment  
**Publisher** Electronic Arts  
**Format** PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One  
**Release** Out now

This is the biggest leap forward for the battle royale since players first set foot on Erangel



teammates are around. Bloodhound's ultimate, which gives you a brief period of faster movement and both tracks and highlights enemies, is a useful tool that really comes into its own when Bangalore has used her smoke-grenade ability to reduce everyone else's visibility. Gibraltar's damage-blocking shield benefits from Wraith's portal, which allows you to retreat at speed should things go south. Lifeline's healing drone means she's worth keeping close even before you consider the passive skill that lets her revive downed allies more quickly; meanwhile, Pathfinder's ability to set up a zipline anywhere on the map creates surprise flanking routes or speeds up your escape from an encroaching zone perimeter. None of this is to say Respawn has designed the concept of solo play entirely out of the game – indeed, *Apex Legends* is often at its best when the one remaining player beats the odds, dispatching an entire enemy squad before reviving fallen teammates. But characters work so well together that you'd be a fool to assume you're better off on your own.

Especially when one of you dies. Get downed and bleed out and you drop a 'banner', which a teammate can collect and, by taking you to one of the respawn beacons that dot the map, bring you back into the fight. You'll have lost all your gear, and there's a risk for your teammates since the dropship that carries you will alert rival squads in the vicinity. But it's a clear benefit to the formula, ensuring (mostly) that players don't simply quit out when they die, and creating another route to the moments of table-turning, match-winning heroism that give this genre its unique thrill.

**The real magic**, however, is the 'ping' system, which lets you highlight any direction, area or object in the game to other players. During the jump, any player can suggest a landing zone; by pinging the marker, teammates can agree to it. On the ground, you can point out specific loot drops, a waypoint appearing on allies' screens and a voice line telling them what it is (brilliantly, by pinging it, a comrade can call dibs). You can suggest a new waypoint for the group, be that a certain route or a building that looks unlooted. By double-tapping the ping button, you can call out an enemy's location, while a long press brings up a sub-menu with more options. You can even ping icons in your inventory to let allies know that you're looking for a particular ammo type, weapon attachment, gear piece or restorative. This is Respawn at its best, an idea you can't believe no one has had before that you feel certain will become a new genre standard.

The game's inventory management is another leap forward. Attachments are automatically applied to weapons as you pick them up, and if they fit on a newly acquired gun will be auto-transferred. Ammo comes in four colour-coded variants, a glance at the HUD





**ABOVE** The squad are commendably diverse, but they're no less bland for it. It's hard to get excited about alternate skins, though no doubt designs will grow more outlandish over time, in the *Overwatch* style. **RIGHT** We can only apologise for the lack of action on show in these pages, but have you ever tried to take a screenshot of a battle-royale game? Either nothing is happening at all, or *absolutely everything* is



**BELOW** Getting caught by the ring isn't necessarily a match-ender. Holstering weapons increases sprint speed, ziplines are abundant, and you can even redeploy from certain stations, using your jetpack to cover a lot of ground at speed



**ABOVE** Bloodhound's ultimate ability feels borderline broken when used correctly, which is to say we don't think it needs patching at all. We hope to see weaker elements buffed before the upper tiers are looked at





showing what your currently equipped weapons require. The UI makes clear if you already have a stronger attachment, mod or gear piece equipped. All told it's an inventory that practically looks after itself, which greatly helps the pace of the game. After all, no one plays a battle royale because they like fiddling about in menus.

The loot itself is a rather mixed bag, at least at launch. While only a couple of weapons feel overpowered currently – specifically the Peacemaker shotgun and, on mouse and keyboard at least, the Wingman pistol – too many of the others are either a little weedy, or require luck with weapon attachments to feel viable. You might find a couple of guns you like early on, but then stumble upon a range of scopes, stocks and barrels that suggest you might be better off using something different. Carry space is limited, even with a high-tier backpack, and when your luck's against you you're often left to choose between making do with bog-standard add-ons for the guns you have on hand, or spec'ing for a weapon you have no idea whether you'll find. This is fair enough in a genre that thrives on making you make tough decisions, but it means that only rarely are you afforded the thrill of finding a gun you know can make a difference for you. Instead, it's likely only the beginning of a hunt for the right mods.

Still, gunplay is snappy, precise and has the heft and impact we've come to expect from Respawn's work. Sniping, the purist's choice in battle royale, is a difficult task, not only because of the need for the right weapon or the lengthy time to kill, but also because players are so mobile. Movement is fast (even faster if you holster your weapons), and a delicious slide ability makes faraway players even harder to pin down. While characters are a good deal less mobile than in *Titanfall* –



#### THRONE BREAKERS

Kings Canyon is the sole map in the game at launch, though Respawn confirms more are in development. Like *Black Ops III*'s Blackout, it feels like a bunch of deathmatch maps stitched together, but just about hangs together as a place. There are no obvious focal points like *Fortnite*'s infamous Tilted Towers; rather, those looking for a sweaty start can head to the part of the map that's highlighted with a blue ring to denote its high-tier loot drops. A supply ship also drifts across the map at the outset for those who want to gamble a possibly short life against the strongest of starts.

The initial jump is a delight, and not just for the most motivating soundtrack since *Rocky IV*. It shows the game at its most colourful, too, with multicoloured jetpack smoke criss-crossing the clear blue sky

Respawn's admission that wall-running in a battle-royale setting was a balancing nightmare feels well-founded – you're fast and nimble enough to be able to escape trouble a lot of the time. Mantling and a barely perceptible wall climb make you feel more mobile than the genre standard even before you start to consider the ziplines strewn across the map.

Currently, the only real downer comes, predictably, from the game's monetisation model. As in *Overwatch*, you earn XP for your in-game activities, and upon levelling up are awarded a loot box, or Apex Pack, containing cosmetic items. There may only be eight characters at launch, but the cosmetic pool is already impossibly large, and the payout of crafting materials miserly enough to mean that crafting the skin, menu pose or voice line you want will involve a lengthy grind. It's a poor incentive for play, and an even worse one to pay for. New characters are a more worthwhile investment, though whether the rate at which Respawn can pump them out will be enough to keep the game's lights on remains to be seen.

There is nothing here that cannot be fixed, of course – and these are mere wrinkles in the context of a genre whose games typically emerge in early access, fraught with problems on far more fronts than this. *Apex Legends* arrives fully formed, feature complete, free and quite, quite brilliant, a game that pushes its host genre forward, refining and redefining its template in the process. Who knows whether it will have legs in a genre whose leading lights have so flouted established convention. But it's off to one heck of a start.



## Post Script

Apex Legends isn't just a masterclass in battle-royale design. It's a triumph of marketing too

There are no real secrets in videogames any more. Someone, somewhere, is always in the know, and often only too happy to share. The videogame press may not be in the business of spoiling a company's impending announcements, having decided some time ago that it didn't want to stand in the way of the hype train, but it loves a good gossip as much as any other profession. And so, in the handful of days between EA flying select influencers, #content creators and online media to the US to play *Apex Legends* and it being announced and released, more than half a dozen separate sources got in touch to ask if we were aware of it.

We were not, and neither seemingly was anyone else, which is some achievement. It is remarkable enough that EA managed to convince Respawn to shelve the apparently in-development *Titanfall 3* and pivot to the hottest genre in town without the news leaking out – particularly since a number of Respawn staff moved over to Infinity Ward last year, seemingly in response to the decision. It is even more remarkable that Respawn managed to get the game to version 1.0, ready for launch, with neither press nor public getting even a sniff of it.

This cannot have been easy for EA either, and it is to the publisher's great credit that it elected to keep *Apex Legends* under wraps until it was ready for launch. It is tremendously active on the promo circuit, especially now it runs its own event, EA Play, alongside E3. Its press conference last June was not so much a damp squib as a sopping wet one, and it must have been tempting to sneak in the news that the *Titanfall* folks were making a battle royale. The timing of the game's release was certainly canny, coming days before a set of disappointing quarterly financial results, caused by *Battlefield V* selling less than forecast. Apex's immediate success – soaring to the top of the Twitch charts, unseating *Fortnite*, and reaching 10 million players inside 72 hours – more than made up for the resulting drop in EA's share price.

**We often give** EA a rough ride in these pages, and deservedly so. Yet it equally deserves praise in this instance for recognising that, just as battle royale games have defied established convention – buggy, roughshod games somehow becoming the most popular titles on the planet – so too must their marketing. Indeed, the couple of days between *Apex Legends*' existence leaking and its release make clear that EA made the right decision. On forums and social media, the game was instantly written off, and understandably so – as we observe in our review, a written description of *Apex Legends* is far from flattering. A muddy screengrab started doing the rounds, and the game was damned still further.

The reaction over those days shows the logic behind Respawn and EA's thinking, finely put by Drew McCoy,

It is to the publisher's great credit that it elected to keep *Apex Legends* under wraps until it was ready for launch



one of the producers. "We're doing a free-to-play game, with essentially loot boxes, after we were bought by EA, and it's not *Titanfall 3*," he told Eurogamer. "It's the perfect recipe for a marketing plan to go awry. So why have that? Let's just ship the game and let players play."

The game industry's big players, EA included, have come to appreciate the value of a 'shadow drop', a game announced for immediate release during a stage show. Yet *Apex Legends* is the biggest game to date to be released in this manner. It's the easiest thing in the world for a publisher to release some earnest little indie thing it has funded for a relative pittance, but a game of *Apex Legends*' pedigree and production values can expect to be in the spotlight for far longer. Yet lest we forget that one day, *Fortnite*'s battle-royale component simply came to exist; it was announced the day it became available, and both saw immediate success. This is no accident. Indeed, it may be the only way to market a battle royale.

How would EA build and sustain buzz for *Apex Legends* had it announced the game at EA Play last June? It has one map and one mode, which is simply not suited to the steady drip-drip of information with which most contemporary big-budget games are promoted. *Battlefield V*, you may remember, is getting a battle royale mode. It was announced, funnily enough, at E3 last year. It is due for release this spring. Any buzz it previously had – and we are not aware of much – has now evaporated.

Indeed, if there's one misstep EA has made, it's what *Apex Legends* has done, and may yet do, to the publisher's own release slate. *BFV*'s battle-royale mode, Firestorm, is one casualty, at least for now. And launching a free-to-play online shooter barely a fortnight before a paid-for one feels like quite the vote of no confidence in *Anthem* and BioWare. EA has form for this, infamously putting Respawn's own *Titanfall 2* up against that year's *COD* and *Battlefield* instalments. Supposedly the developer itself had lobbied for the chance to go up against Activision's FPS juggernaut: Respawn was founded by the heads of *Modern Warfare* developer Infinity Ward. But it lost, as EA surely knew it would. The outlook for *Anthem* was already bleak after a miserably handled January demo. It is now at risk of drowning in *Apex Legends*' wake.

EA remains resolutely hard to read, then – and its successful handling of *Apex Legends* in no way means it has finally cracked this marketing lark and will never make a mistake again (ask BioWare). But it saw that this very different kind of genre requires a very different promotional approach. And as its game sits at the summit of the Twitch charts, breaking engagement records at a rate of knots, it is clear it has executed on its strategy perfectly. Perhaps most importantly it has given Respawn – until now the underappreciated jewel in EA's crown – the spell in the spotlight it has long deserved. ■



# Metro Exodus

**D**mitry Glukhovsky's Metro novels imagine an alternative to a failing system of governance: starting civilisation again from scratch. Although the central concept doesn't feel too far removed from *Fallout*'s as you experience it in-game, Glukhovsky's writing goes out into the irradiated weeds, exploring what the gloomy documentarian Adam Curtis dubbed 'hypernormalisation' in his 2016 film of the same name. Given enough time, even a system that's failing to the point of absurdity, as in the latter days of the iron curtain, feels normal when we experience it day-to-day. And this makes it nearly impossible to imagine an alternative to that system – until the bombs drop, hitting society's big red reset button.

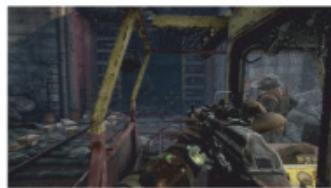
To that end, *Metro Exodus*' apocalypse is altogether more optimistic than the glut of brown wastelands we've been treated to over the last decade. This isn't humanity surviving for the sake of it in a world with almost nothing left to offer, but instead building itself up again, liberated from the shackles of a crumbling regime. It's cheerier – just slightly – than prior *Metro* games, too, both thematically and visually. Returning protagonist Artyom now has a much broader colour palette in front of his gas mask, a world alive with environmental variation and the faintest glimpses of hope in among the derelict high-rises.

After it transpires that the effects of the nuclear holocaust at the centre of *Metro*'s lore were slightly exaggerated, Artyom and his subterranean-dwelling community embark on an overground train ride in search of humanity, or at least a better offer than living in underground tunnels beneath Moscow. Conceptually that's quite a draw. Shooting giant rats in dark corridors was explored to the full extent of its potential in prior *Metro* games, and this new train ride conceit allows 4A Games to introduce broader overground areas – not quite an open world, but a game of substantial hub-worlds which each allow for more player freedom and visual variation than anything prior in the series.

**Whatever trepidation players** might have had over *Metro* – a self-proclaimed hardcore shooter that places atmosphere and immersion above all else – wandering clear of linear FPS design, they needn't have worried. First, *Exodus*' environments are as vivid and detailed as anything 2033 or *Last Light* produced. Second, it's still a deeply linear shooter. Each hub world, from the icy banks of the Volga to desert tundra and thick forest, features a handful of secondary objectives, coaxing you off the beaten track, but the path between primary objectives still feels curated. Rowing a boat into the riverside church of a fanatical cult; pulling off a train carriage heist from a wrecked railway and speeding away to safety; fighting off a pack of zombies at the entrance to a dusty desert tomb at sunset – all

**Developer** Deep Silver  
**Publisher** 4A Games  
**Format** PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One  
**Release** Out now

For all its extended NPC dialogues, cutscenes and non-interactive set-pieces, it doesn't have much to say



## HUD RIDDANCE

The *Metro* series' commitment to immersion is exemplified in its efforts to minimise menus and HUD elements. As such, much of the vital info in *Exodus* is worn by Artyom: a timer on his wrist indicating how long your air filter will last, a radiation levels readout next to that, a physical map and compass he checks manually to find his way. More complex information, such as weapon modifications and their effects, are relegated to menus, but they're tucked away in the periphery while the weapon itself sits on a workbench, keeping you tethered to the environment. Ranger Hardcore difficulty removes all HUD elements altogether, including ammo readouts and the crosshair. Finding a laser sight becomes a real priority.

choreographed set-pieces that appear emergent. You're wandering the path the developer intended, but you feel like you're doing it out of choice, and that's no mean trick. There are frequent problems with pathfinding in *Exodus*' environments, however, which too often leave you looking for an obscured lever, valve or gap in a wall only passable via QTE. These moments blemish what's otherwise one of the strongest aspects of the game.

4A's own engine articulates this world beautifully, as 4A's games always have, but it's a beauty that works best when you're standing still. Its array of bleeding-edge lighting effects, HBAO and Nvidia's new RTX ray-tracing tech on PC makes for wonderful screenshots, and some truly memorable walks through Glukhovsky's apocalypse. However, it's beleaguered by PC performance issues and bizarre glitches. Not only is a stable 60fps unreachable with an RTX 2080 TI at 4K and max settings, it even proves elusive at 1080p and the high preset. Character models often judder on the spot as if being reset by a console command, while corpses tend to vibrate furiously in whatever position they fell. The AI exhibits some odd behaviour, too. Bandits get stuck on the scenery, allies shoot the floor for minutes on end, and on one occasion an aquatic monster rises up from the ground – *the ground* – to instakill our hero.

Most frustrating of *Exodus*' technical shortcomings, though, is its hit detection. Too regularly, accurate hits don't register at all. *Metro*, you'll remember, is a shooter about just scraping by, and every bullet counts because ammo is so scarce. All these performance issues remind you, in neon capital letters, that you are playing a game – and so evaporate that precious immersion. And wasting ammo through no fault of your own feels like a failure to deliver on *Metro*'s most fundamental concept.

All that can, and presumably will, be patched – but the pacing may be beyond saving. For all its extended NPC dialogues, cutscenes and non-interactive set-pieces, *Metro Exodus* doesn't have much to say. It takes four hours to establish that there may be life somewhere other than Moscow, and during that time the ratio of active player-led to non-interactive content feels close to 1:1. You're given far more control after that point, and the hub worlds invite you to explore at your own pace, but *Exodus* persists in its erroneous belief that five-minute conversations during which NPCs exchange phrases only ever heard in videogame cutscenes are worth your attention.

*Metro Exodus* is a mood piece, and it hits that mark brilliantly by building detailed environments and laying set-pieces within them for you to find, as if by chance. However, in its efforts to emphasise that it's a long-form experience, its storytelling comes across as plodding, and every time a glitch or framedrop appears you're pulled out of 4A's rare, and beautiful, post-apocalyptic vision.



**RIGHT** Colonel Miller loves order, discipline, a well-pressed beret and the sound of his own voice. He's often at the centre of the game's many protracted conversations, normally to voice reluctance.

**MAIN** On the banks of the Volga, your train hits a roadblock set up by technophobic zealots. The inevitable confrontation with their charismatic, spittle-flecking leader is teased out over several hours.

**BOTTOM** This is as dignified as death gets in *Metro's* world. Behind these graves, petrified corpses hang suspended over a flooded warehouse on ropes, a photograph of them attached to the fibres



**ABOVE** Each seasonal and environmental change in *Exodus* is a revelation, showcasing 4A Engine's visual heft and reinvigorating the player's desire to wander a dead world. Beware the vicious mutant bears, however





This is the kind of game in which you notice the high-poly count teeth of the NPC models, and their porous skin

## Post Script

Is using in-house tech in 2019 an asset, or a problem?

**M**etro Exodus shares a distinctive look and feel with its predecessors. Much of that can be attributed to 4A's proprietary technology, appropriately titled 4A Engine and based in C++. Its visual benefits are abundant: in addition to arguably the highest visual fidelity levels in an FPS to date, it takes advantage of Nvidia's new RTX features: deep learning super-sampling (DLSS) and realtime ray-tracing. It's the first title to do so, and this agility must be seen through envious eyes by other studios granted their engines by a thirdparty licence.

The ray-traced reflections in Exodus' mournful, mutant-filled waters are certainly striking, producing levels of detail that simply wasn't there in reflective surfaces before the advent of this tech. DLSS, designed to aid performance using deep-learning algorithms, has a less pronounced effect given the game's chugging performance on even the most powerful consumer card currently in existence. It's at least a start, though, which 4A and its contemporaries can learn from and implement with more discernible results in future.

If both the Jekyll and Hyde of Exodus' performance and fidelity can be chalked up to its engine, at least some of its more esoteric mechanical features stem from 4A Engine too. The apparent necessity of implementing a

QTE to perform contextual movements such as climbing a ladder, for example, smacks of an engine with less refinement in player movement than Unreal or Unity. The same criticism might be levelled at the inherent clunkiness of Artyom's running animation, head-bobbing, and jumping. Veterans of 4A's previous Metro offerings will recognise the sensation of dragging a tumble dryer across the wastelands immediately.

Still, it feels mean-spirited to pick apart every rough edge without also celebrating the existence of a game engine made in-house. Twenty years ago the landscape was filled with similarly ambitious ventures, games built from the engine up to accommodate specific visions and groundbreaking features. Would the Thief or System Shock games enjoy a soft spot in the collective consciousness without the Dark Engine's distinctive look, feel and AI? And what would the industry look like without Goldsrc, Valve's reworking of the Quake engine? Would modders still have laid the foundation for franchises such as Counter-Strike? The HPL engine has birthed nearly every big name in horror games over the past decade, and the very mention of Black Isle's Infinity Engine brings a nostalgic tear to many an RPG fan's eye even in 2019. So much so that spiritual successor Pillars Of

Eternity is now two games deep, mimicking the tech limitations of the engine, and the era.

Before Unreal and Unity became quietly ubiquitous, these bespoke engines made for bespoke experiences. Like 4A, their developers accepted higher overheads and a bigger risk of tech issues in exchange for a toolset tailor-made to create their vision. In this case, there's a lineage of creators who sought a very particular vision: one of post-nuclear eastern Europe, one made in eastern Europe. The first iteration of 4A Engine came about as a result of several GSC Game World developers leaving the studio before the release of STALKER: Shadow Of Chernobyl to make their own game. Like STALKER, Metro 2033 required spectacular lighting effects created by anomalies and large outdoor spaces populated by ruined skyscrapers and urban decay. Unlike GSC's game, it also needed to articulate details in tight interior spaces and choreograph grand set-pieces.

Over three subsequent games (including a redux), 4A Engine raised the bar for overall fidelity without really shedding that feeling of guiding a household appliance through tense shooting set-pieces. So it goes with Metro Exodus, a game that delivers on its promise of atmosphere, hardcore combat and exploration but can't find finesse in the fundamentals. ■



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# Resident Evil 2

When is a remake not a remake? Capcom's lavish refit feels at times like one of Umbrella Corps' dubious experiments: intertwined with the DNA of the original game you'll detect strands of 2002's *REmake* and *Resident Evil 4*, and that's just for starters. It retains the same two playable characters (newly-qualified police officer Leon S Kennedy, having the worst first day ever; and student Claire Redfield, in zombie-infested Raccoon City looking for brother Chris) and follows a similar story for both. Otherwise, this rarely feels like an old game made shiny and new so much as a very contemporary kind of survival horror that happens to be based on an 21-year-old game. Still, for all that it loses a little of its identity in the switch to an over-the-shoulder camera, this is a consistently exciting action game that, barring a slight middle-act wobble, has the strongest pacing of any *Resident Evil* this side of Mikami's magnum opus.

It's a strange feeling at first – thrillingly new, yet shot through with moments of déjà vu. Those are rarely down to fuzzy memories of the original so much as the dawning sensation that *Resident Evil* might be slowly mutating into the games it originally inspired. If you played *The Evil Within* and its sequel, in particular, you'll feel the whiff of familiarity which takes a little of the shine off an outstanding visual makeover. It riffs on *Dead Space*'s tactical dismemberment, too, in that you can now shoot off a zombie's limbs. Target the arms and you'll limit their reach, but aiming lower is a better bet: a couple of pistol rounds is enough to send them sprawling forward, leaving them with one leg that now stops at the knee. Even in such a pitiful state, they'll lunge forward to gnaw at your ankle, unless you take time to finish them off. Then again, given ammo is in short supply, that might not be the wisest idea.

In other words, zombies are a threat to be taken seriously once more. It's not the extra gristle and sinew that makes them horrifying, but their tenacity. They can withstand a good few headshots before collapsing, and they don't always stay down, rising unexpectedly on a return visit to a room you thought was safe – unless you ensure their heads are, well, no longer intact. Others will launch themselves through windows, though their entry can be blocked by nailing up wooden boards. Either way, trying to kill them all will only leave you desperately short of firepower for anything tougher. Staggering them usually suffices, but then running past is risky. Corridors are a perfectly awful width: there's a little more room to manoeuvre than you had two decades ago, but that just means you're more likely to chance a dash through those tempting gaps.

Then, just as you're getting used to dealing with them, new threats arrive – or old ones given a fresh coat of paint, at least. The terrifying Lickers aren't quite as imposing now Leon and Claire's top halves fill the

**Developer/publisher** Capcom (R&D Division 1)  
**Format** PC, PS4 (tested), Xbox One  
**Release** Out now

Like all the best horror, it's about pushing you somewhere you'd rather not be



## UNDEAD AGAIN

Whether your first playthrough is as Leon or Claire, the second character's campaign remixes just enough to keep you on your toes, from puzzle solutions to enemy placements – Mr X seems to arrive a lot sooner, too. Still, you can rely on your memory of safe combinations and the like to hurry things along, which means you can reach the new stuff all the sooner – although rushing too much is naturally fraught with risk. There are bonuses for finishing both campaigns on Standard difficulty and above, but if you're finding it all too much, Assisted mode offers the cushion of an auto-save, while giving you a small health top-up when you're injured. Hardcore mode makes the zombies even tougher, while forcing you to locate ink ribbons for the typewriters in the save rooms.

screen, yet they're quick and vicious enough to send you into a panic, as you waste the shotgun ammo you were keeping back for the next boss while frantically backtracking to stay out of range of their claws. And then there's the relentless Mr X, who periodically storms through doors and smashes through walls, striding towards you like a trenchcoated Terminator – albeit one that can be avoided by continually circling furniture, or humiliated by shooting off its fedora. Still, he'll punish the moments of complacency when you veer down a cul-de-sac, while his pursuits can easily cause you to stumble into a zombie you hadn't finished off. Occasionally, he's more of an irritation, getting in the way of completing the game's bizarre puzzles. These, too, have changed, though they're in keeping with the series' off-kilter logic. Most involve more busywork and backtracking than deduction, particularly given the limited inventory space that forces you to make snap decisions on what you can afford to leave behind. But that's often the point: like all the best horror, it's about pushing you somewhere you'd rather not be.

**Though unpleasant, the** Raccoon City Police Department building is a marvel of design. This remains a brilliantly conceived and deviously intricate puzzle box, one that sends you down winding, sometimes counterintuitive paths that join up in devilishly clever fashion. For all that it loses some of the original's sense of theatre in how its shocks are staged, it consistently finds ways to compensate, whether it's leaving zombies waiting around blind corners for careless players, or simply by dimming the lights and limiting you to negotiate your environment with a feeble torch beam. It is, in short, one of the classic horror settings.

As with the Spencer Mansion, it's unfortunate that it's not deemed enough to sustain the entire game, since the underground areas that follow aren't nearly so memorable. And a brief section where you take control of Ada Wong, armed with an electronic scanner to trigger hidden mechanisms, is a change of pace that probably made more sense on the design document (Claire's alternative is far better). Any lulls are quickly forgotten once you reach Umbrella's lab, its pristine white walls smeared in viscera, the action building to a climax as entertaining as it is operatically silly.

It's a pity the performances don't match the escalating absurdity: the voice acting is adequate, but the B-movie charm of the original's bad dialogue and stilted delivery is all but absent. Such inconsistencies are perhaps to be expected of a game that makes a conscious effort to blend old and new. But if it's not as efficient a remake as, well, *REmake*, that hardly matters. When this enthralling hybrid is delivering blood by the bucketload and thrills by the dozen, you won't exactly be thinking about what it isn't.



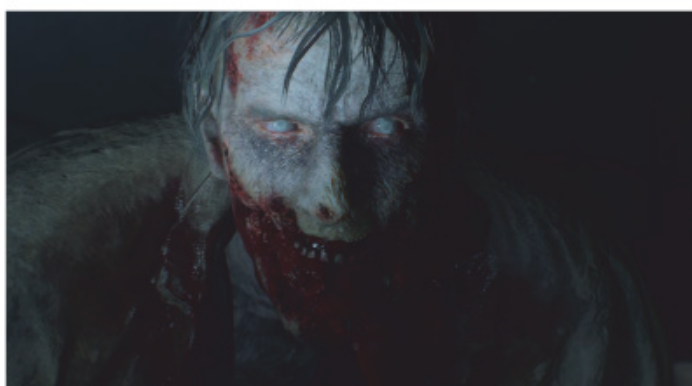


**ABOVE** It doesn't work with every enemy, but with a secondary weapon equipped you can fight back before taking major damage. Combat knives can be recovered from downed zombies, while a grenade stuffed into a mouth can be shot for a messy finish.

**LEFT** Capcom shows some restraint with jump scares, and actively misleads you in some cases. As a general rule, if your entry to a room is trouble-free, your exit won't be



**BELOW** Finding a handful of rounds is a relief, but hip pouches and gunpowder are the real godsend. The extra pocket space provided by the former is handy for combining two of the latter, giving you enough bullets to relax for a while



**ABOVE** The cutscenes are pretty gruesome in places. By contrast, the in-game gore is as fascinating as it is disgusting: you'll marvel at the locational damage as a zombie forearm goes limp and flops to the floor





# Kingdom Hearts III

Well, if you'd been dragged arse-backwards through multiple dimensions, you'd be a bit of a mess, too. Oh, we're not talking about Sora: with his perfectly coiffed hair and eternal Plasticine smile, *Kingdom Hearts III*'s hero somehow bears little sign of his troubled past. We're talking about the game itself. *Kingdom Hearts III* was always going to be a difficult thing to pull off, not just as a creative balancing act between two of the world's biggest entertainment companies, but also as the culmination of a beloved (and now tortuously convoluted) epic. Sadly, the scars from the splicing of so many different worlds – Disney and Square, levity and gravitas, ten years ago and the present day – are all too visible.

That's not to say, however, that this isn't a thing of great beauty and ambition. There's an undeniable earnestness to *Kingdom Hearts III* that is infectious. It's dizzyingly gorgeous, for one: the Disney worlds are note-perfect recreations of the films, Square's artists aping the preternaturally lush meadows of Tangled's Kingdom Of Corona as masterfully as they do the crystal-clear waters of Pirates Of The Caribbean's sprawling ocean. Enemy design is consistently delightful, from whimsical, dandelion-headed Heartless to some earth-shaking end-of-level bosses.

Nowhere is Square's desire to pull out all the stops for the end of the trilogy more apparent than in the Toy Story world. It encapsulates so much of what is good about *Kingdom Hearts III*: meticulous attention to detail, a clear desire to delight and surprise the player at every turn, moments of homage to Disney's IP that indicate a genuine love for the subject material, and a wickedly funny sense of self-aware humour. From its Gigas mechs and possessed dollies to the ball pit full of treasure chests and various winking references, it's here that Square's impossible task approaches success.

It's obvious that this world was Tetsuya Nomura's baby. Others don't fare as well. Frozen's Arendelle is a flat wasteland of white and blue that has you repeatedly running up and down a mountain for no discernible reason; Big Hero 8's San Fransokyo is over too soon, and its one-dimensional city feels like wasted potential. In the endearing, typically *Kingdom Hearts* rush to provide players with as much variety as possible, the quality of minigames is uneven – the rhythm and cooking games are a joy, and even an attempt at *Assassin's Creed*'s naval combat works, but the less said about Hundred-Acre Wood's match-three clones, the better.

Trying to build a game on volume and variety alone runs the risk of coming off vacuous, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the combat. It's easily one of *Kingdom Hearts III*'s crowning jewels, almost single-handedly holding together the seams of the game as a whole through sheer force of will. There's a momentum to proceedings, helped by the return of *Dream Drop*

**Developer/publisher** Square Enix  
**Format** PS4, Xbox One  
**Release** Out now

The pacing ensures playing *Kingdom Hearts III* is a bit like being dragged through a theme park while hungover



#### SOUR NOTE

The Gummi Ship segments of *Kingdom Hearts III*, as ever, are close to interminable. It's the main method of transportation between Disneyfied planets: after over a decade of development, you'd think Square would come up with something better than a flight sim fished out of the Dreamcast's bargain bin. Flying between worlds is a slog, and you're often forced to fight limp, protracted battles with enemy ships before being allowed to land at your destination. The ability to customise your ship's appearance to a generous degree does offset some of the irritation – it's difficult to take anything too seriously when you're piloting a candied effigy of a cheeseburger.

*Distance*'s Flowmotion system, which lets Sora fling himself around lampposts or bounce off walls for flashier, high-damage attacks – although *III*'s more open levels mean it's often less intuitive to activate as you endeavour to manoeuvre into just the right spot. Attractions, meanwhile, are a largely harmonious fusion of Disney and Square: nowhere else in videogames can you watch an anime lad juggle a Disney villain between the bow and stern of a glittering pirate ship while a photorealistic Donald Duck eggs him on. Each one is spectacular, a self-contained minigame in which we spend cumulative hours busting Blaster Blaze high scores and freehanding puerile Splash Run tracks.

But as the hours wear on, it becomes apparent that there's very little substance underneath all the shimmer. Aside from a handful of slight tweaks – being able to block in mid-air, or store Keyblade forms without depleting their timers – combat changes are superficial. Despite receiving new abilities right up until the end, we never feel like we've learnt anything of value. The most efficient tactic is usually to mash the attack button before summoning nearly-always-available and ultra-powerful Attractions or assists. There's a sense that, in an effort to ensure everybody has a good time, the indulgence has gone further than is sensible.

Indeed, the pacing ensures playing *Kingdom Hearts III* is a bit like being dragged through a theme park while hungover. Giddy fun is frequently interrupted by painfully banal cutscenes: this is, of course, nothing new for *Kingdom Hearts*, but some traditions shouldn't be upheld. It's 25 hours of heavily truncated Disney movies that have no bearing on the game's main plot, before the 'save Sora's friends/clones from the abyss and prevent the time-travelling bad guy from kicking off a new age of darkness' thread resumes at a speed so breakneck it's exhausting. If there was an opportunity to have the narratives gel, it has not been realised.

Several crucial narrative resolutions, years in the making, feel rushed and anticlimactic. But then there are other moments during the finale: dramatic, impassioned set-pieces that do justice to a decade of waiting, with ideas that inject *Kingdom Hearts* with a much-needed shot of modern energy. These flashes of brilliance are even more arresting for their unexpected appearance in a game with manual save points in this, the year of our lord 2019. This is a PS2-era JRPG that would have been a revelation ten years ago, parts of which have been updated along the way in an effort to keep up with the march of time, and parts of which have suffered in the attempt. It's a bizarre mix of the antiquated and the contemporary that has struggled to extricate itself from its own tangled mythology. The problem is that – despite the glossy veneer and the best of intentions – it shows.





**ABOVE** The manual save system can be infuriating in a game filled with cutscenes – 12 hours of them. This tiresome boss fight follows a series of them across two separate worlds: we had hoped to stop for the night



**MAIN** Keyblade transformations are marvellous, and the new Keyblade Forge ensures that we can level up our favourites and keep them viable throughout the game.

**ABOVE** Sora and Woody running on a record player to solve a puzzle seemingly references a scene in the second Toy Story film.

**LEFT** The cinema in Twilight Town hides one of *Kingdom Hearts III*'s Lucky Emblems. These collectibles are captured via the Gummiphone camera – another uncanny modern element we doubt was in Square's original plan 13 years ago



# Wargroove

As the old saying goes, there are two types of people in this world: those who love *Advance Wars*, and those who haven't played it yet. Chucklefish is evidently in the former group, since *Wargroove* is as indebted to Nintendo's turn-based strategy classic as *Stardew Valley* was to *Harvest Moon*. The degree to which it borrows from its inspiration is quite brazen, even if it comes across more as earnest tribute than calculated cash-in. For its part, Nintendo seemed to have given its unofficial endorsement by offering Chucklefish a slot in one of its Direct broadcasts – possibly to appease those waiting for the series to return. Still, there's a difference between one person making a personal love letter to a beloved game, and a developer/publisher releasing what at times feels like a fan mod – albeit a very accomplished one. Either way, if Eric Barone clearly understood what made *Harvest Moon* tick while adding just enough to give his farming sim a fresh spin, *Wargroove* lacks the deceptive simplicity and exquisite balance of *Advance Wars*. It's a generous game, yes, but often to a fault.

If at first glance the fantasy trappings make it look more like Intelligent Systems' other strategy series, it's only superficially similar to *Fire Emblem* – and besides, that didn't have nearly so many dogs. Everything else – from the gridded maps to the dinky units, the user interface to the split-screen attack animations – is, to all extents and purposes, *Advance Wars* reskinned, only this time instead of infantry, tanks and jet fighters, you get spearmen, knights and airborne witches, and rather than anti-air guns and rocket launchers, you have ballistae and trebuchets. Not every unit has a direct analogue, not least since *Wargroove* has many more types. There's an extra wrinkle, too, with critical hits dealing extra damage when a unit attacks from a specific position. Soldiers, for example, should be kept by their Commander's side where possible, while Cavalry units need to travel six spaces from their start point. And you should avoid roads when an enemy's Fell Bat is nearby.

**The campaign makes** a decent fist of showing you the ropes, gradually introducing new units and features. You'll find yourself facing a new and deadly enemy type, only to be immediately given the tools to deal with it. In the early game you'll be informed of how terrain types can affect movement range and attacking and defensive stats. You'll get the opportunity to send canine scouts scampering up mountains to clear the fog of war, while being reminded to keep them protected, lest the mist descend to cloud your view once more. And you'll be apprised of your current commander's titular power: it takes a few turns or kills for them to get their groove on, but you'll find everything from obstructive vines to the ability to summon a ready unit in an adjacent tile. In a few cases, you're limited to a

**Developer/publisher** Chucklefish  
**Format** PC, PS4, Switch (tested), Xbox One  
**Release** Out now

Rather than make the AI smarter, it unbalances the map and starting units to favour the enemy



## ALTERED ARMY

The sheer variety of units can't really be faulted, with medieval archetypes joined by some monstrous additions – there may only be cosmetic differences between, say, Vampires, Harpies and Leafwings, but it gives each CO a distinctive-looking army. Yet the designs don't always scale particularly well, lacking the clean, simple designs and chunky, tactile feel of *Advance Wars*. That's especially true on the tile info screen, where you can see which enemy types your selected unit is vulnerable to and effective against – the muddle of tiny, barely decipherable icons reminds you of how needlessly complex the relationships between units can be. It's noticeable on the battlefield, too, which gets messy when units bunch up. And though they look good and move smoothly in the cutaways, many attacks lack weight.

small number of units, such as a mission where you follow a friendly spirit while the undead rise up in pursuit. But generally you'll want to capture towns to earn funds with which you can produce new units at base – or else save up for healing moves and hexes that cost hard cash each time they're used.

After a strong start, however, everything escalates a little too quickly, and battles start to drag before you've reached the halfway mark. Maps are comparatively large, and it can take several turns just to get to the frontline. While some skirmishes play out like puzzles, others devolve into long, attritional exchanges – not least since units can also heal up next to captured towns by spending a small sum equivalent to damage taken (albeit weakening the town's defences in the process). Having your CO on the battlefield allows them to have a more direct impact, but since you need to keep them alive at all costs, one small mistake can undo half an hour of careful progress. Factor in that fog of war doesn't seem to have any impact on the AI, and the game's habit of suddenly dropping in new waves of enemy units for which you couldn't reasonably have prepared, and you'll see the Defeat screen more often than seems fair. At times it feels as if you're being taught how to fail a map before you get the chance to beat it.

*Wargroove* also pilfers *Advance Wars*' least appealing tendency: rather than actually make the AI smarter, it unbalances the map and starting units to favour the enemy. But where Intelligent Systems tended to wait until the final missions before really ramping things up, the difficulty curve spikes regularly here. Sliders to reduce enemy damage dealt or to boost your cash reserves feel less like a sop to beginners so much as a necessary corrective to wonky balancing. Still, if you're not the kind to stubbornly persevere with a stage until the trick to getting through it becomes clear, you might well consider this a blessing.

Multiplayer doesn't solve all of these problems, though *Wargroove* does feel altogether fairer when the playing field is level. The customisation tools are exemplary: there's a flexible stage creator that doesn't just let you build single maps, but also allows you to assemble them into a campaign, with an overworld into which you can slot and connect your creations. Yet the underlying game could have done with the time and attention spent on all these features and options. Taken on its own merits, it's a challenging turn-based strategy, with plenty to admire. As an homage, however, it's a reminder of the value of design by subtraction. We once suggested *Advance Wars* had the most refined ruleset since chess; Chucklefish's approach is akin to assuming chess could be improved by adding a dozen pieces and making the board twice as big. It's a game that follows the steps of another while changing the rhythm – and in doing so, never settles into its own groove.



**RIGHT** *Wargroove's* animated opening is an introduction to the various commanders, including Caesar, the Queen's dog. With thoughtful positioning, his power to inspire surrounding units to take another turn can be very effective.

**BELOW** As in *Advance Wars*, you'll need to weigh up whether to rush out low-cost units or save up for a few turns to unleash a big fellow like the Golem, which makes up in power what it lacks in mobility.

**MAIN** Arcade mode offers a short campaign for each CO which is played across more compact maps. Puzzle mode, meanwhile, gives you a single turn to defeat your opponent: a trial-and-error lesson in maximising the effectiveness of the various troop combinations



**ABOVE** A detailed codex fleshes out character bios. More and more pages of an increasingly convoluted backstory are the intended incentive for completing campaign missions and arcade runs for each leader





# Slay The Spire

You'd be forgiven for recoiling at the sheer trendiness of *Slay The Spire's* description – as an indie, card-based, Roguelike dungeon crawler fresh from a year in Early Access, it could conceivably have been generated by some buzzword algorithm. But, as our 100-plus hours of playtime attest, there's rather more to it than meets the eye.

Each run involves picking your path through the winding tower that gives the game its name, making decisions during brief, text-based encounters, and, most frequently, battling monsters. In a fight, your every action is represented with a card – whether it's a sword swing, a parry, a dodge or something more exotic. At the end of each battle, you're offered the chance to add one of three new cards to your deck, and may earn a potion (for a temporary bonus) or an artifact (for a permanent, potentially game-changing one).

Spent cards aren't (usually) lost – they're sent to your discard pile, before eventually cycling back into your draw stack. So, though the order in which you pull cards is random, there's a reliable rhythm to your deck, especially if you can keep it small. The best ones take on the character of a finely tuned engine, propelling you through the dungeon with mechanical efficiency.

But it's an engine you've got to tune while you're already hurtling down the motorway. *Slay The Spire* turns deck-building into an act of frantic, reactive invention. Your final, perfect strategy may be present in your mind, but it's ever-mutating in response to the imperfect needs of the here and now. Powerful cards and artifacts tempt you to shift direction; malevolent 'curse' cards throw a spanner in the works; and powerful monsters bite chunks out of your health (a precious resource, as it's carried over between fights), forcing desperate survival strategies.

Each cleverly designed creature tests your deck as it forms. One enemy, a sort of giant, lazy hermit crab, lies dormant for three turns if undisturbed, before waking up to dish out devastating attacks. The game is essentially asking: what can you pull off if you're given time to prepare? Others temporarily stuff your deck with junk, or get stronger the more you defend yourself, or randomise the costs of your cards. Each in its own way demands your deck be as versatile as it is lean.

**When everything clicks,** it's incredibly satisfying – like coding your own game-beating moveset. And, crucially, on the many more times that it instead crashes and burns, it feels fair. The game provides you with all the information you need, from which attacks enemies will make in their next turn, to which cards are in your draw pile. Loss never leaves you feeling cheated, only keen to head back in, and try something new.

*Slay The Spire's* randomisation serves as an endless source of inspiration. You might dismiss a card as

**Developer** MegaCrit  
**Publisher** Humble Bundle  
**Format** PC  
**Release** Out now

Your final,  
perfect strategy  
may be present  
in your mind,  
but it's ever-  
mutating in  
response to the  
here and now



## CARDOGRAPHER

At the start of each of the game's 'acts', the full map is revealed, and carefully plotting your path across it is vital to success. Some corridors are blocked by Elites, dangerously powerful monsters poised to exhaust your resources. At first you'll learn to avoid them, conserving your health, but as you gain skill and experience you'll find that the artifacts they're guaranteed to drop are too precious to pass up. Shops dotted around provide new cards and items, but at prices that force you to plan ahead – realistically, how much gold do you expect to have four fights from now? Meanwhile, random encounters add atmospheric spice with their weird, text-based asides, often offering up tricky decisions that can have lasting effects on your run.

unworkable for hours, before an unexpected combination thrown up mid-run has you looking at it in a different light, your head suddenly full of new theories. The game stands ever-ready to test them – even once you succeed with each of its three characters, the ongoing Ascension mode, in which each victorious run makes the next progressively more difficult, tempts you to keep going, building ever more refined decks and learning more of the idiosyncrasies of the tower.

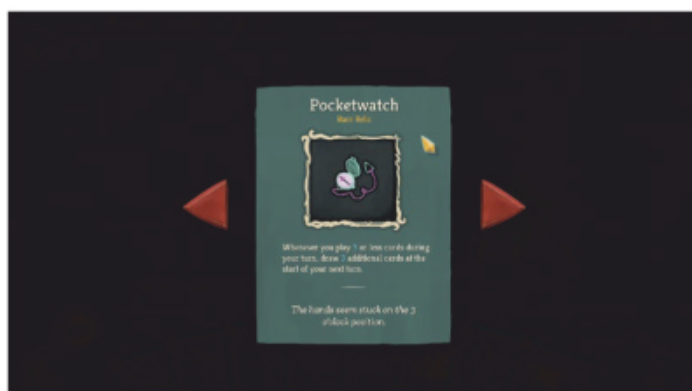
Each of the three playable heroes offers a radically different playstyle. Though they loosely conform to classic RPG archetypes (fighter, rogue and wizard), in play each reveals a unique personality. The warrior-like Ironclad relies on heavy armour and two-handed sword, but also on demonic pacts that boost his power while burning away his health and cards. The agile Silent flips quickly through her deck, drawing and discarding to find the combos she needs to leave foes weakened, poisoned and riddled with shivs. The Defect summons elemental orbs, either conserving them for their passive benefits or evoking them for an advantage, all the while rewiring and upgrading its robotic body.

They're brought to life by a slightly crude, yet charming, art style that hints at a bizarre larger setting. The world of the Spire wavers between absurd humour and surreal horror, at some times struggling to find its atmosphere, and at others seeming to deliberately subvert your expectations. The cultists of the early levels at first seem ridiculous in their hand-made bird costumes, like the cast of a gritty Sesame Street reboot, but when you eventually meet the wounded, hunched god they dress in imitation of, their outfits take on a rather more sinister aspect.

Battles, though, can feel a little lifeless. Animation is minimal, leaving the game's highest moments of action looking disappointingly static. But while the visuals struggle to captivate, they do do an admirable job of conveying information. Enemy 'intentions' are displayed cleanly above their heads, colourful icons revealing what they'll do once you've taken their turn, and how much damage they'll inflict if you don't throw up enough blocks. The cards themselves are similarly readable, offering short, keyword-driven abilities that keep text to a minimum, while still allowing for all manner of complexities in play. Crucially, they always work like you expect them to, interacting intuitively despite the countless possible combinations in play.

And perhaps a lack of spectacle in battle is appropriate to a game whose kicks are more mechanical than bombastic. Without flashy attacks, action is found in the ebb and flow of the cards – the lucky draw that saves your bacon, the sloppy miscalculation that costs you everything, the perfect plan six rounds in the making. And, sweetest of all, the satisfying thrum of a finely tuned engine.





**ABOVE** Some artifacts offer minor bonuses, such as an increase to your max health, while others are worthy of building an entire strategy around. This one rewards decks that play a small number of high-cost cards each turn



**TOP** New players will often grab every strong card they see, but more often than not an effective deck is a small deck, and one of the most potent rewards you can discover is the ability to give up a card, rather than gain one.  
**MAIN** These enemies are able to resurrect as long as at least one of their kin is still alive, forcing you to ensure they all die in the same round – a feat requiring careful management of your damage.  
**LEFT** The game's full of trade-offs and tricky decisions. Bonfires, for example, allow you to either heal yourself, or upgrade a card. The former might keep you alive, but the latter will make your deck far stronger in the late game



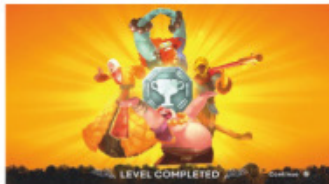
# Unruly Heroes

Okay, we take it back: maybe we don't want every single thing on Switch after all. In handheld mode *Unruly Heroes* is an absolute disaster, its teensy protagonists all but impossible to keep track of, its many other flaws somehow made even more plain despite the small display. On a big screen, things improve, but only slightly, and not for long. This is a game that shares an art style with Rayman's recent outings – and a development team too, since the studio that developed it is staffed by several Ubisoft veterans – but, unfortunately, the similarities end there.

We could talk about what makes a good platform game until the cows come home, but among its barest essentials are elegance and response. When you press a button, the result should feel good; and if it looks like you've done something right, the game should treat it as such. The clue, sadly, is in the name: *Unruly Heroes* is, at its core, deeply unreliable. Attacks intended for one direction will frequently come out in the other. Jumps that look like they should comfortably cross a chasm end with you falling through a ledge (sometimes, but only sometimes, you can mantle). Dashing through a set of hazards, you'll pass clean

**Boss encounters are multi-phase battles – a polite way of saying they go on a bit. The partner revival system means the game can throw whatever it likes at you, safe in the knowledge you effectively have infinite lives**

**Developer/publisher**  
Magic Design Studios  
**Format** PC, PS4, Switch (tested),  
Xbox One  
**Release** Out now, TBA (PS4)



## NOT BUILT FOR SPEED

A level-ranking system rather optimistically encourages repeat play, and for the maximum you'll need to find all the coins (typically 100) strewn about the levels – many of which have their own unique interpretation of collision. You'll need to be quick (most of our silver trophies come as a result of taking too long) and, crucially, clean, since your death total is taken into account. So, you'll need to be thorough, fast, and flawless – the latter requiring that you commit to memory which platforms are real, and which only appear to be.

through something you thought would kill you outright, then die to thin air.

As if to offset that, in singleplayer mode the game lets you switch between four characters at the touch of a button – if one dies, its essence floats around for whoever comes next, and when hit it becomes available for use again. Two of them have a double jump, the other pair a glide, but the real point of difference between them is their special puzzle-solving abilities, activated at character-specific statues. One can magic up a bridge; another fires a projectile at far-off switches; a portly porcine fellow turns himself into a helium balloon to reach high platforms; and the fourth uses its strength to knock down walls. These are specific solutions to specific problems, and rarely require much thought, even later in the game when you'll need to use several of them in quick succession.

Combat, despite looking the part, is similarly dreary. While well-animated, too many fights are busy, messy, and will often drain your health bar without you being entirely sure what's hitting you. Still, we'll take a fight over a platforming section any day, the iffy collision and a frightfully uneven difficulty curve turning what looks like a hearty romp into a wearying slog. It's better in co-op – what isn't? – but this is a game that prizes style above all else, and emerges a mess because of it.

4





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# Revolve8

At first, *Revolve8* feels like a reactive kind of strategy game — one where it pays to let your opponent play their hand first and then respond appropriately. Which is fitting for a game that is, to all extents and purposes, Japan's answer to Supercell's enormous *Clash Royale*. It's in landscape rather than portrait mode, boasts anime-style art and cutaways, and comes with some pedigree — *Yakuza* producer Masayoshi Kikuchi and *Xenoblade* composer Yasunori Mitsuda are on board, while Koji Igarashi is behind the entertainingly silly character designs. But the object is essentially the same. Each player has a deck of cards and three towers; destroy more than your opponent (or take down their central tower) within three minutes and you win. And if there's still nothing to separate you, overtime will kick in until the next tower falls.

The most noticeable differences aren't improvements. The user interface isn't as tidy as its inspiration, and while the menu portraits are beautiful, characters look a little rough in-game. It's not well optimised for larger displays, either. We'd assumed a hefty bonus download would, as in *Fire Emblem: Heroes*, result in higher-resolution assets; alas, the jaggies are hard to miss even on high settings. Yet somehow the action remains

As free-to-play smartphone games go, *Revolve8* is relatively generous. Early adopters get enough gems to quickly unlock a few books (the game's loot-box equivalent) so that you can level up a few individual units

**Developer/publisher** Sega  
**Format** Android, iOS (both tested)  
**Release** Out now



## TALES FROM THE HOOD

*Revolve 8's* two singleplayer story modes see heroes from Japanese folklore (Momotaro) rubbing shoulders with European fairy tale characters (Red Riding Hood). These double as extended tutorials for the characters involved, letting you get to grips with their strengths and weaknesses in short, discrete missions away from the pressure of an online game. The story interludes, which you can either tap through in silence or subtitled Japanese, are pretty dreadful, but happily you can skip straight to the playable sections.

readable throughout, the black outlines and distinctive unit types ensuring you can keep track of the action.

Its cast of reimagined storybook favourites is more than just a cosmetic flourish. Each has a unique power that can be deployed every 30 seconds, and an extra single-use ability if you position them as your army's leader. Deploy them at the right time, and any of these can turn the tide, and there are dozens of entertaining combinations to discover. The tanky Emperor — whose new clothes do preserve a modicum of modesty — can absorb attacks and attention while you hurry Aladdin's glass-cannon genie over to a tower to drop his payload.

With sudden zooms for specials and brief cutscenes for leader powers, there's a sense of visual drama to these briskly-paced battles, particularly in the final minute when your supply of ink that paints these units into existence refills twice as fast. Meanwhile, as you climb the leagues, the deck options broaden and your opponents become more adept, you'll realise that it sometimes pays to be proactive, lest your opponent's towers withstand your late-game rush. Either way, *Revolve8* makes eking out a one-tower victory with a defensive masterclass every bit as thrilling as a straightforward all-out assault. It may not give Supercell sleepless nights, but if you've ever thought *Clash Royale* could be improved by adding Cinderella on a motorbike, well, fill your boots.

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# Eastshade

For an artform with “video” in the title, videogames too often treat their own visual accomplishments as distractions — camouflage, even, for objectives and targets. *Eastshade* is one of the few that makes looking the point. It unfolds on an island seemingly plucked from the coast of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, a blissful stretch of foliage and cobbled paths where zoomorphic peasants bustle about domed villages and butterflies pattern the air over tumbling brooks. There are simple fetch-quests, branching conversation puzzles and even a few very Bethesda blemishes, such as the gulf between the enthusiastic voice acting and the wooden facial animations. Rather than a well-armed Chosen One, however, *Eastshade* casts you as a painter, seeking to immortalise views dear to your recently departed mother. You also paint for people on the island to raise funds and access new regions, accepting commissions or unearthing hints about subject matter in dialogue.

It’s a timely reassertion of the power of the gaze — and of art as an emancipatory practice — in a genre animated by bloodshed. Sadly, it doesn’t quite go the distance. *Eastshade*’s trick is that you aren’t really a painter, but a photographer. The “paintings” are screen

*Eastshade*’s world has some simple gating elements — you’ll need people to endorse your access to its core city, plus a warm coat for painting after dark. But not much keeps you from those inspirational vistas

**Developer/publisher**  
Eastshade Studios  
**Format** PC  
**Release** Out now



## BRUSHED OFF

*Eastshade* is not above making the odd joke at the expense of the rambling fantasy epics that so inspired it. You’ll meet a blacksmith, for instance, who tells you that the only thing more boring than forging swords is killing people with them — she’d much rather make kettles. There is something of a grand conspiracy at work on the isle of Eastshade, in fairness, but it mostly pertains to the correct way to drink tea.

captures through a filter, blooming under your eye as though printed on self-developing film. You pick the angle and alter the shot dimensions, but you don’t wield a brush: the only resources you’ll need, in fact, are canvases, which you can buy or cobble together yourself. Clients, moreover, seldom test your knack for shot composition: as long as the area or object they’ve asked for is visible, you’ll get your fee.

In this regard, *Eastshade* is as much an escape for frustrated painters as it is one from the carnage of videogame fantasy, and it’s a little too gentle to satisfy. A full-blown painting sim would have been a tall order given the developer’s tiny headcount, but *Eastshade*’s setting, for all its abundance of pop-in and raggedy framerate, is crying out for more elaborate methods of representing its beauty. There’s an ironic moment when you take over commissions for an artist who has tired of naturalistic vistas and embraced abstract art. By the end of the game, you may feel the same way.

If the core mechanic is a missed opportunity, it’s a joy to watch your landscapes travel. Paintings don’t vanish once handed over — you’ll stumble on them later, mounted above tables and fireplaces. It demonstrates wonderfully how developers might allow players to leave a mark on their worlds without conquering them. *Eastshade* may not be the game it could be, but it paints a picture many others could learn from.

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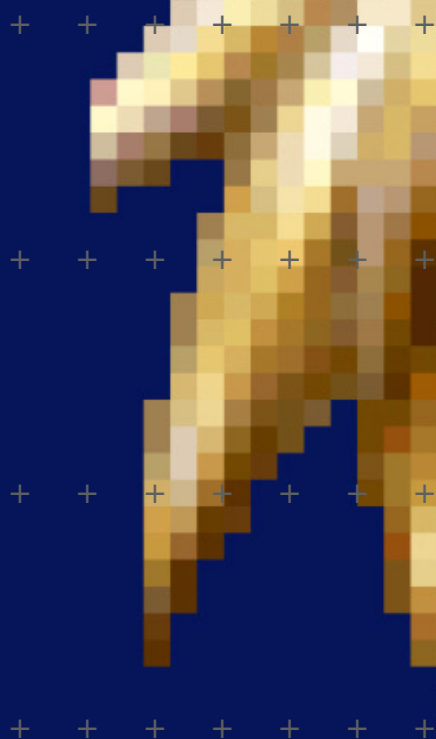


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# Chrono Cross

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Revisiting the sequel that feels like it's  
from a parallel universe

**By EDWIN EVANS-THIRLWELL**

Developer/publisher Square Format PS1 Release 1999





**T**he first hour of *Chrono Cross* is deceptively sleepy. It opens, like many a Japanese RPG before and since, with the game's protagonist Serge awakening in his home, a village in the archipelago of El Nido. Through the window, clouds nose about a balmy equatorial ocean. Down the hall, Serge's mother fusses at dishes and scolds you for rising late – after all, aren't you supposed to be meeting that girl you like? Heading out the door, you find children playing tag with their pets while elders gossip about events in the wider world. In a meadow, the village chief holds sparring lessons, running through the basics of elemental alignments and stamina. It's a study in rural tranquility, genre tropes settling around your shoulders like a comfort blanket. Near the entrance, a short-sighted old man launches into a tour guide's spiel before breaking off in embarrassment when he realises you're a local.

So begins what seems to be just another tale of rag-tag pastoral adventuring, of mute heroes rising from backwoods origins to roam and defend a world marinated in cliché. *Chrono Cross* is that game, on some level, but it's also that game through a mirror. In one hut, you meet a fisherman who boasts of the trophies that adorn his walls, but confesses to wondering whether his life could have taken a different course. It sounds a peculiar note in a setting that feels impervious to change, snug as a fly in amber. There are other flickers of unreality down at the pier, where Serge's sweetheart Leena watches over her siblings as they frolic in the shallows. A boy takes a running dive into the water as you approach. Leave and return to the village, and you'll see that same boy taking the plunge, again and again.

Then comes the big twist. Following a quest to collect Komodo dragon scales to make a necklace for Leena, you meet her on a remote beach and are suddenly *elsewhere*, the ground liquefying beneath your feet as the sea fills the sky. When you regain consciousness, the world has altered in myriad ways. Returning to your village, you are greeted again by the old man, this time as a stranger. Your mother has vanished and your shack is now a grubby bachelor's pad:

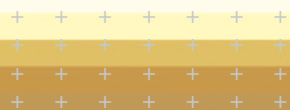
in an absurd touch, there's a Komodo dragon in your bedroom who charges you for the privilege of sleeping there. The initially upbeat map music is now a rolling lament, and the wistful fisherman has become a recluse who worships a straw idol as protection against life's unpredictability. There's still that boy, trapped in his endless dive off the pier, but Leena no longer recognises you, though she muses that you remind her of somebody she once knew. At her suggestion, you wander along the coast to a lonely gravestone, high above the waves. The name on it is your own.

**Two decades old** this year, *Chrono Cross* is a tale of parallel realities that dwells poignantly on how a life might turn on the slightest detail, stretching out threads of yearning and regret between dimensions. It is about the strangeness of realising that everything you know could have been otherwise, an exploration of mutability that comes across most strongly in the game's obsession with the sea. Dungeon environments often resemble ocean floors, overwhelmed by starfish, huge scallop shells and spires of weedy bone. Larger towns like the city of Termina are hung with nets, cages and oars, skiffs sliding under bridges as you shop. The game's title screen hovers against swirling polygonal vistas of a coral reef, fish darting among the menu options. Even the combat has a certain undertow, each battle map suffused by an elemental energy field which at once empowers abilities of the same element and is altered by them. Tactical applications aside, this creates the sense of being submerged and participating in a complex tidal flow.

As with many stories about alternate dimensions, *Cross* can be off-puttingly convoluted, its second half awash with quantum hijinks, various world-saving/ending McGuffins and obscure nods to its predecessor, the landmark 1995 RPG *Chrono Trigger*. Playing it for the first time, fans of *Trigger* may have felt like they'd stumbled into a parallel universe themselves. Though notionally a sequel, *Cross* is more of a reworking of *Trigger*'s core themes: it's the product of a reality in which *Final Fantasy VII* had changed the commercial rubric for RPGs forever. The new game's director, Masato Kato, had written and planned ►

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scenarios for *Trigger*, but his experience as a writer on *VII* together with mecha odyssey *Xenogears* (itself once pitched as a *Chrono Trigger* sequel) is a stronger influence on *Cross*. Moreover, by the time *Cross* entered development many of the original *Trigger* team had moved on, among them writer Yuji Horii and designer Hironobu Sakaguchi, creators of the original *Dragon Quest* and *Final Fantasy* respectively.

These shifts – together with the advent of expanded memory budgets on CD-ROM – are obvious in the switch from the SNES game's top-down landscapes to lushly painted, angled backdrops. While classic *Trigger* elements such as synchronisable character special moves return, combat now unfolds on separately loaded 3D stages from a giddy variety of camera angles. The real point of departure, however, between *Trigger*



counterpart to bring about catharsis or explore a theme, though the breaching of the dimensional barrier isn't always this benign. Much of the game's doubling and displacement is concentrated in the person of Serge, asked first to endure a reality in which he is an anachronism, then forced out of his own body and into one literally shaped by a fear of loss. This latter twist pays into a fantastic mid-game reset, where

It's best not to pair up characters with opposing elemental traits – when you alter the chemistry of the battlefield to empower one, the other will struggle

## IT HAS A BEWILDERING EXTRAVAGANCE OF PARTY MEMBERS – 45 IN ALL, RANGING FROM CHEFS TO LUCHADORS

and *Cross* is how each game thinks about time. Where the SNES game steamrolls through its world's history, bundling together allies from several periods on its way to an apocalyptic reckoning, *Cross* sticks to the here and now but offers two uncanny versions of it. Rather than making the link from what is to what was, as *Trigger* does, it is about reconciling what is with what might have been. Every character, thing or place in the game is illuminated or shadowed by its double: a rock star who is a different gender in the other universe, a jaded waitress versus a waitress who hasn't yet given up on her literary aspirations, a wild expanse of sea that, in one world, contains a massive sci-fi facility, and in the other, its wreckage.

Quests often see you literally introducing a person to their otherworldly

you must gather a new party as the second character, ultimately reuniting with your old allies towards the finish.

**All of which** may sound rather sombre, but part of why *Cross* is a joy to return to is that it's often very silly. While given its marching orders by *Final Fantasy VII*, one of the sterner series entries, it's closer in spirit to *IX*, the daydreaming prankster of the series. Hence its bewildering extravagance of recruitable party members – 45 in all, ranging from apoplectic chefs and teenagers in tutus to luchadors, mushroom men, sneaking homages to *Street Fighter*'s Vega and squidgy aliens that evolve based on the elements they wield. Few of them have any major bearing on the main quest, but they make for vivid company, and many are on heartfelt journeys of their own. They also



The story is more enjoyable when read for its symbols and psychological texture than for its plot, which is a headache





## HONEYED WORDS

It would be remiss to revisit a Square JRPG without mentioning Richard Honeywood, the Australian localisation director and translator responsible for many of the publisher's best English-language adaptations. Honeywood began his career as a programmer on *Final Fantasy VII*, a game infamous for its spotty English translation, but eventually became head of a dedicated internal localisation team. Now at Level-5, his credits include four *Final Fantasy* games and three *Dragon Quests*. *Chrono Cross* is peak Honeywood in how it finds English-speaking equivalents for the nuances of Japanese pop culture and myth. Its characters speak a delightful range of British and American accents, in a script that balances whimsy, grandeur and pathos.

The characters aren't quite chibi-style, but they do appear more playful than the unsmiling stars of other PS1 *Final Fantasy* games



The game's households are wonderfully colourful slices of life, their lightly animated fittings hiding the odd collectible spell or lore document

offer a generous spread of skillsets in combat, though the ability to plug abilities and spells into each character's element grid (à la *Final Fantasy VIII*) means that they can feel interchangeable once you've worked out a killer strategy.

The game's battle system is stylish and engrossing but also deeply peculiar. Given the context, it's probably most provocative for refusing to explain its handling of time. There are three tiers of attack, with weaker strikes making stronger ones more likely to hit. Attacks also cause the character to gain element ranks and thus, the ability to cast spells, but drain a stamina gauge. Stamina replenishes while other characters are acting, and, in a twist on the usual party-based format, you can switch between them freely, landing a few light blows with one in

order to restore another's stamina reserves. There are no turns as such – rather, actions advance time till an enemy can act, with more dangerous foes able to act more often. There's absolutely no indication of this on-screen, however: instead, you must work out the action frequency of each monster as you go. It's a baroque mess to rival the likes of *Resonance Of Fate*, but the business of learning each opponent's "clock speed" while portioning out time between party members is quietly resonant: it continues the theme of soldering together timeframes in the narrative.

At the time of writing, *Chrono Cross* is the last *Chrono* title in existence. Despite a warm reception from critics and fans, the series foundered in its wake as key staff moved on, some joining Tetsuya Takahashi's new studio Monolith Soft to work on unofficial sequels to *Xenogears*, others gravitating to the better-selling *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* series. Square toyed with a third game titled *Chrono Break*, but dropped it before announcement; concepts from this project would later appear in the mobile spin-off *Final Fantasy Dimensions II*. It's probably too much to hope, at this stage, that the publisher might return to the series, but it's also hard not to, given the impending *Final Fantasy VII* remake and the arrival of "new games in the old style", such as *Octopath Traveller*. If any JRPG of the '90s deserves to be brought forward in time it's surely this, one of the smartest, saddest and strangest ever made. ■







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# T H E L O N G G A M E

A progress report on the games we just can't quit



## Hitman 2

**Developer** IO Interactive **Publisher** Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Release** 2018

The episodic release schedule of 2016's *Hitman* was met with some controversy – enough that, for the sequel, IO Interactive ditched the structure. All told, it was a bit of a shame: the slow drip-feed of new locations turned out to be a neat fit for the *Hitman* formula, encouraging players to pick each map clean before the next arrived. All of *Hitman 2*'s levels arrived at once, making a whirlwind world tour possible on day one, but IO has worked to retain the same spirit through weekly releases of contracts and challenges that squeeze every last drop out of the half-dozen locations.

There are a variety of updates on offer. Challenge packs reward specific ways of playing the original missions, while Escalations and Contracts shift the focus to a new target, picked out from the level's crowds. Contracts are user-generated, ensuring a steady flow of new ways to play, but Escalations are developer-crafted, presenting a string of triple-tiered missions. After each successful completion, the game stacks on another rule or target, and then asks you to do it all over again: okay, you can assassinate this scientist with a battle-axe, while dressed as a flamingo mascot – now, what if we make it three scientists, against the clock, without hurting any civilians?

These are puzzles with set solutions, guiding your hand in order to highlight elements of a level you

might have missed on your first, or fifth, playthrough. The repetition forces you to find the most efficient paths through a level, to memorise the routes of NPCs. It's knowledge that proves valuable in the big headliner of *Hitman*'s monthly schedule, acting essentially as the game's final exam: Elusive Targets. These are one-off missions, available for a handful of days, which do away with the repetition and experimentation entirely. A new character is introduced to a familiar location, and you have a single chance to find and kill them. If your execution is messy, or the attempt ends in your own death, well, that's the version you're stuck with.

The mode launched with a big stunt, casting Sean Bean as *Hitman 2*'s first Elusive Target. Aside from sheer star power, the mission had a tangibly larger budget, with bespoke dialogue – much of it winking at the trope of Bean's characters always getting bumped off – and multiple guided paths to victory.

That same level of polish isn't present in every instalment, but they work regardless, because the spaces themselves are so beautifully constructed. Each is an intricate puzzle box, the internal clockwork of NPCs, events and triggers within too much to experience in one run. The actual content of each new update is perhaps less important than simply having an excuse to give those workings another prod. ■



A photograph of pink cherry blossoms in full bloom, with many petals falling from the branches, creating a dense field of pink petals against a dark background. The blossoms are in the upper right corner, and the petals are scattered across the entire frame.

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